



HOUSE OF GOD

REV. DR. MICHAEL KARIMATTAM

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"I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said: "Smite the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and what are left of them I will slay with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape." (Am 9,1). Why does God ask to destroy the temple and kill all those who came for worship? This prophecy of Amos comes as the conclusion of his critic against cult without compassion and devotion without justice.

The House of God or rather God's presence among the people is the main theme of this book. The Bible starts with the Paradise where man walked with God in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3, 6) and ends with the New Heaven and New Earth where God would make His tent among the people (Rev. 21, 3). "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev 21, 22). Thus there was no temple in the beginning and there will be none at the end either. In between, the bible tells about various temples or modes of God's presence among the people, such as the Ark of the Covenant, the Tent of Meeting, the Jerusalem Temple, the Body of Christ, The Community of the faithful etc. In this book an attempt is made to go through this long evolution in the view of the places of worship and encountering God's presence.



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by **Dr. Michael Karimattam**

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INTRODUCTION

“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev 21, 3). “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” Rev. 21, 22).

The House of God or temple is a place where the faithful gather to experience the presence of God. In general the word house refers to a place where people stay. At the same time it could refer to a place where things are kept or a place where something is made available to those in need. House of God is a place where one experiences the presence of God and receives the blessings from God. There is no religious group that does not have some kind of a place of worship; they might be known as “church”, “temple”, “mosque”. Ultimately it is a place of encounter between man and God. According to the faith of the people, there will be some difference in the nature and goal of the worshipping place. The literal meaning of the place, “House of God” would be that it is the place where God dwells. There are religions that believe in many gods. But for the people who believe in One

God, “House of God” would refer to the dwelling place of the Almighty God.

This book tries to discuss the nature and significance of the House

God according to the Bible. The Bible starts with depicting the picture of the Paradise where man walked with God in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3, 6). At that time, there was no particular place or house for God. Bible ends with the New Heaven and New Earth where God would make His dwelling among the people (Rev. 21, 3). Hence there will be no “House of God” at the end either when the history of salvation is completed (Rev. 21, 22).

Between the beginning and the end, we find various views and pictures in the Bible regarding the “House of God”. They are different in the early history called “Primeval History”, during the time of Patriarchs, Exodus, stay in the Promised Land, monarchy, Babylonian captivity and the post exilic period. A new understanding about of the “house of God” emerged in the teaching of Jesus and his attitude towards the Temple of Jerusalem. Ultimately He presented His own body as the true House of God. The Apostles interpreting the teachings of Jesus began to see the Church and every believer as House of God.

This book makes an attempt to trace the steps of this long evolution of the concept of the Temple, the House of God, in the History of Salvation. Many use the name church rather than the “House of God” as “church” is easier to use. However, we have to keep in mind the fact that the word Church can point both to a building as well as to the people of God, as community.

1

GOD WALKS WITH MAN

“They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3,8).

Paradise:

In the beginning of the Bible we see the picture of God who walks with man. The first account of creation, usually understood as the Priestly narrative, tells us that God created man in His own image and likeness, and made him His representative on the earth (Gen 1, 26-31); whereas the second account of creation known as the Yawhist account, presents the same event in a more dramatic and picturesque way: “The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (Gen 2, 7 – 8).

“Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”.... So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Gen 2, 18-23). During the evenings God came to walk with the human beings, in other words God was the constant companion of them. There was no particular place for God; “Paradise” was the place where God and man lived together in the same place. In a way that was the first “House of God”.

There man was free, but responsible for taking care of the garden. At the same time man had to live and do things according to the directions God had given. The episode of the “forbidden fruit” is a symbol of the expressed will of God for man. Paradise is a place Adam and Eve, the first parents, lived with God. It was a time of absolute happiness.

Outside the Paradise

Paradise is a nostalgic memory; at the same time it is a dream. It reminds us that God had given to humanity a time, a life of pure joy that should have lasted forever; it was a time of being with God, without pain and sadness, separation and death, tears and lamentation. The picture of Paradise reminds that such a joyful life was available for the human beings. At the same time it refers not only to

a lost joy but also to a dream of a life with God, that man could attain in the future.

However, the story of the paradise also evokes the tragic awareness that humanity lost the paradise because of disobedience and infidelity to, as well as rebellion against God. The door of the Paradise was closed and angels stood guarding the door with fiery swords (Gen 3, 24). Still, God did not abandon the human beings. He promised to save them from the dominion of Satan under which they had fallen through the sin and to restore their status as the children of God (Gen 3,15). Only after giving the promise of Redemption were they cast out of His presence.

The ensuing episodes demonstrate that though the people were put out of the Paradise, they were not far from the presence of God. God was there to accept the sacrifices offered with great understanding, not only of the objects offered but also of the mentality of the person who offered the sacrifice. Knowing the attitude of Cain and Abel, God accepted the sacrifice of Abel but rejected that of Cain (Gen 4, 7). But when, disregarding His warning Cain murdered his brother Abel, God appeared before him and questioned his action: "And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen 4,10-11). Though God punished Cain, still he was given protection from anyone who would try to kill him: "Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put

a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him” (Gen 4, 15).

Cain is a symbol of people who purposely move away from God as “Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4,16). Bible continues to explain through various episodes that God did not abandon Cain but went in search of him.

Noah and the Flood

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6, 5-6). God watched with sadness the state of man who had gone away from Him and immersed in evil ways. God as a loving Father felt deeply hurt by the behavior of people. Before this, there is a short description regarding God’s decision to limit the length of life as people were engaged in sinful activities.

“Then the LORD said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years” (Gen 6, 3). The saying that the Spirit of God “shall not abide in man forever” indicates that in spite of sin, the Spirit of God continued to abide in people. Spirit of God is actually God. This shows that even outside Paradise, in the sinful people, God’s presence continued.

Destruction by the flood waters could be seen as sign of God washing the earth clean of sinful humanity.

Even then the God's presence was there on the earth. God does not destroy everything indiscriminately; Noah the just man and his family were saved and a pair of every living creature with them, so that the life would continue on the earth. "But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth" (Gen 6, 8-10). After destroying everything else in the flood waters, God brings the flood to an end. This is also dramatically presented by the sacred author: "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided" (Gen 8,1). After coming out of the ark, Noah offered a sacrifice. God was pleased with the sacrifice and made a promise never again to destroy the world by a flood. This promise was guaranteed by a covenant. "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Gen 9,9-10). In none of these places do we see any reference to a particular dwelling place for God; He is present everywhere.

God Coming Down

The next episode that speaks about God's presence is related to the tower of Babel. Again in a story form the sacred author narrates the futile attempt of humanity to become equal to God, or rather take God's place. "Come, let us build ourselves

a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11,4). Here we see a description of the place where God dwells. “The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built” (Gen 11, 5). When it is said that God came down, one gets the impression that God is dwelling somewhere up in the sky. This idea corresponds to the belief prevalent in ancient days, deriving from an understanding about the cosmos. It was believed that the earth is flat and the sky is like an immense umbrella above the earth. Above the sky and below the earth, there is water. This picture is evident in the first account of creation in the Book of Genesis, 1,6-7. When God opens the vault of the sky, rain will pour down. This is not a scientific description, but what one sees with naked eyes. Slowly an idea developed that heaven, the dwelling place of God, was above the waters over the sky. A clear example of it can be seen in the statement that God came down to see the tower.

It was the belief that God resided in heaven above the sky that prompted the people to build a tower that would reach up to heaven. The ultimate goal was to become equal to God and sit with God. The real motive lurking behind this thinking is to become independent, absolutely free, with no one above to command. This is a temptation, similar to the one in the paradise that encouraged them to eat the forbidden fruit and become like God. At the same time it reveals the idea that God resides far above the created world. An awareness of the Almighty, absolutely transcendent God is reflected in these descriptions.

The Experience of the Patriarchs

The “primeval, history”, narrated in “Gen 1-11, used mainly the literary form of myth in speaking about God and the realities about God and His actions. Hence the descriptions presented so far should be seen not as direct history, but as stories and symbols. During the next stage of the Salvation History we see God choosing a particular person, and revealing Himself through that person and his descendants. During this time also we do not see God dwelling in any particular place. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve sons of Jacob are known as the Patriarchs. Their God experience gives some valuable insight about the “House of God”.

God of Abraham

The God who revealed Himself to Abraham is one who called and walked ahead, leading the way. God was with Abraham as a guide and protector from the moment He called him out of Haran and throughout his journeys to Canaan, Egypt and back to Canaan where he settled down.

Without any warning God entered into the life of Abraham and called him away from his home land and family. This call of Abraham came after the people were scattered with their failed attempt to build a tower in Babel reaching up to heaven. Hence the call of Abraham marked a new beginning. With that the Salvation History entered the next stage. “Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will

“bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12, 1-2).

Abraham was not told where he was to go and how to reach there. Slowly this will be revealed to him. For the time being he had to do only one thing, leave everything and start the journey. A man was called to walk with God who would lead him wherever he was to go and would show him how to reach there. All that Abraham had to do was follow the footsteps of God. For that he needed faith and trust, expressed through obedience.

“Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran” (Gen 12, 4). It was a long journey but Abram did not waver. Wherever he pitched a temporary tent, there he offered a sacrifice to God and God accepted that offering. He had built tent and offered sacrifice in Shechem, Moriah, Hebron and at several other places (Gen 12, 6, 8, 18) and experienced the active presence of God in his life.

Abraham realized that the presence of God is not limited to any particular place as he experienced it all through his journey, repeating the promises, giving orders and assuring protection. He experienced the protection from the Pharaoh of Egypt and other enemies and rulers (Gen 14, 13-16).

Abraham constantly experienced the presence of God with him as He made the Covenant and repeated the promises. “The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day” (Gen 18, 1). God was

with Abraham all through his journeys testing his faith to the point of asking to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. But Abraham proved his faith and obedience by preparing to sacrifice his beloved son and thus he became a source of salvation for all the people. "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore ...and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice". (Gen 22,16-18) This promise was made to Abraham on Mount Moriah, for the last time. It was in this spot that Solomon later built the Temple.

El-roi

She never expected that encounter. Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl of Sara was coaxed into conceiving a child for her mistress from her master Abraham. Unable to bear anymore the cruelty of her mistress Sara, who became jealous of her, Hagar ran away. She was pregnant, now roaming in the noon day heat of the desert. There was no shade in sight and she was moving toward almost certain death. God saw her and asked her to go back to her mistress promising protection. She gave a name to the God who encountered her, "El-Roi", which means the God who sees me (Gen 16, 1-6). The God of Hagar, El Roi, is the One who is beyond time and space, God is present everywhere.

God encountered her once again in the desert. This time she had not run away but the Master had

put her out of the house. He sent her away with her son, giving a supply of bread and water for a day. She was exhausted. Not to see the death of her son who was crying of thirst and hunger, she moved away from him and sat in the burning sun. Now the angel of the Lord called her from heaven: "And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink". (Gen 21, 17-19). Even in the desert, God was present. Here also we see no particular dwelling place for God who is present in all the places.

Bethel

He was afraid and overcome with guilt-feeling for cheating his brother and Father. The elder brother was so furious that he resolved to kill him. Above all he feared that he invited the wrath of God through his crooked ways and cheating. He ran non-stop to Haran but the sun went down and the face of the earth was immersed in darkness. Overcome with fatigue, on the way side he lay down and slept, with a stone under his head for a pillow. That was Jacob, who felt himself like an epitome of failure and guilt feeling.

However, God sees not as man sees. The heaven opened above his head. "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God

were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. " (Gen 28, 12-16). Contrary to what Jacob feared, God was not angry with him. There was no scolding or accusations but only blessings and promises.

Jacob woke up from his sleep and knew that God was with him. "Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it! (Gen 28, 17). Above the head of the defeated man was God with love and affection. Blessings were poured upon him. Jacob placed a stone there, poured oil over it and praised God. He called the place "Bethel" which means "House of God".

The presence and protection that God gave was not limited to Bethel. It was only one among the many experiences Jacob had. The promise God made to Jacob deserves special attention: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28,15). Bible has recorded that after his return to the Promised Land, Jacob went to Bethel and built an Altar there (Gen 35, 1-8). Later it became an important pilgrim center of Israel.

Peniel

“Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen 32, 30).

Jacob was a coward. His strength was in his legs that he used to run away dangerous situations. But now that also has become impossible. God, who walked with him and protected him so far, now came at night like an enemy and tried to strangle him. In mortal fear his inner strength awakened engaging in a life and death struggle. At the end he won and with that he became a new man. Peniel is the place where Jacob experienced a total change and became a new man— another place where Jacob encountered God.

God fulfilled the promise He made to Jacob at Bethel. In Haran, Jacob experienced protection and prosperity. In spite of his uncle Laban cheating him several times, because God was with him, Jacob became rich. He had four wives, 12 children and a great herd of animals. However, fear continued to go with him as a constant companion. According to the direction he received from God, Jacob returned to the Promised Land but that also was an escape. Because God blocked Laban who perused him, Jacob escaped a dangerous encounter. They reached an agreement according to which Laban was not to come west, crossing the heap of stones they raised as a sign of the agreement, and Jacob was not to go East (Gen 31, 22-50).

Jacob still felt guilty for cheating his brother and it continued to hurt him like a deep wound. He tried to please Esau giving him gifts but was not sure

how effective it would be. He brought all that he had including his wife and children on the Western bank; but stayed alone on the East bank of the river Jabbok. In case Esau comes and destroys everything, he could escape from his attack he thought (Gen 32, 1-21,). It was then that God attacked him like an enemy.

“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (Gen 32, 24). In mortal fear his inner strength was awakened. He had no choice but to fight or die and so he was forced to fight. The enemy had closed all possibility of escape. Finally Jacob understood that it was God who came to wrestle with him to make him strong. All the promises and protection Jacob so far received did not make much change in his character. But this wrestling made him a new person and helped him to become aware of his strength. No more he would try to escape and even if he wanted he could not, as he was limping because of the dislocated hip, the lasting mark of the struggle with God.

It was a unique God experience and Jacob named that place Peniel. The name is a combination of two Hebrew words, (Panim = Face; El = God), meaning Face of God. There was a long way from Bethel to Peniel – the distance from cowardice and cheating to courage and honesty. God entered into the life of Jacob to make this transformation possible.

Jacob was no more scared. He met his brother but there was no hatred from the part of Esau. Jacob realized that all that he thought about his brother and feared were his own imagination. He had the fear generated by guilt feeling and it was with that fear he

wrestled on the bank of the river. God communicates with people through life experiences and that could come in different forms, at times as affection and other times challenges. In this sense, Peniel teaches a valuable lesson. It turned the coward into a courageous one, and took away the burden of guilt feeling. Peniel could be a state of mind or incident in life more than a particular geographical location. The Peniel incident could be relevant in each person's life in different ways. God is everywhere, especially there with you when you feel afraid, to strengthen you, when you feel hurt, to heal you and when you feel lost, to guide you on the right path.

2

ARK OF THE COVENANT – TENT OF MEETING

“Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3, 5).

In this journey, seeking the development of the concept of the “House of God” in the Bible, the next stop is at Mount Sinai. It is one of the most important places where the presence of God was experienced first by Moses and then by the people of Israel as a whole. It was on Mount Sinai that God asked Moses, to make the Ark of the Covenant to help the people to experience the presence of God in their midst. As directed by God, under the leadership of Moses, the people made the Ark of the Covenant.

God Experience of Moses:

His mind was disturbed, unsettled and afraid. He could not forget the misery of the Israelites in Egypt. Like an open wound, it continued to hurt

him. His attempt to end the oppression and slavery through violence met with utter failure. To execute justice he had killed the overseer of slaves in Egypt for beating an Israelite. But, it created just the opposite result. Though the Pharaoh brought up Moses as his own son, hearing the case of murder, the king turned against him and decided to kill him. Fearing for his life, Moses fled from Egypt (Ex 2,11-15).

He took refuge in the house of Jethro, the priest of Midian and married his eldest daughter Zipporah. He took over the job of looking after the sheep of his Father-in-law. However, his mind was troubled as he wanted to find a means to end the misery of his people in Egypt. It was then that he had that vision, a bush that was burning but not being consumed by the fire. "Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up'" (Ex 3, 3). The tongues of fire seemed to be the external expression of the fire inside him. As Moses approached the burning bush he heard a sound coming from the fire. "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex 3, 5). The ensuing conversation revealed the nature of God who was calling Moses for a great mission.

Though the narration started with saying the "angel of the Lord" soon it becomes evident that it was God who was speaking. The God, who called Abraham and protected Jacob, has now appeared in the burning bush on a mountain in the desert. That is the particular nature of God who had promised to Jacob that He would be with him wherever he goes

and protect him all through his life. God said to Jacob: "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes" (Gen 46, 3-4).

With great respect, the Egyptians received Jacob and his sons; but later they became cruel and enslaved the descendants of Jacob and treated them badly. This happened with the change of rule in Egypt. In BC 1550 the Hyksos, who were a foreign power, had been defeated and a new dynasty took over the rule. It was during the reign of the Hyksos that Joseph had been raised to the highest rank and Jacob with his family was invited to and settled down in Goshen, the most fertile area of Egypt. Now the new regime turned the Israelites, who were considered as foreigners, into slavery and forced labor. While they were working hard, making bricks, they were beaten by the Egyptian supervisors. The sweat and blood of the Israelites mingled with the mud. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Ex 2, 23-25).

God is present everywhere especially when the victims of human cruelty and oppression cry against injustice. He heard the cry of the blood of Abel and responded with power. Moses realized that God would come down to put an end to injustice liberating the oppressed. At the same time he was called to

work with God to establish justice for the persecuted. Moses felt it was too great a task for him and tried to evade, but God was determined to use him as the instrument for liberating the slaves and forming them into His own people. As a helper his own brother Aaron was given to Moses

Moses believed and gradually experienced that God would keep His promises. One by one God sent ten plagues upon Egypt; the Pharaoh and the Egyptians came to experience the power of God. The Pharaoh was forced to let the slaves go but as they departed he had second thoughts and decided to bring them back to keep them as slaves. He with the army chased the people of Israel who were fleeing from him. But “The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; ...It came between the army of Egypt and the people of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night” (Ex 14, 19-20). The “Cloud” became darkness for the Egyptians and light for the Israelites.

The Israelites passed through the path God made parting the waters in the middle of the sea. The Egyptian army that followed the Israelites into the parted sea experienced the power of God as the waters turned back and covered them: “The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians, clogging their chariot wheels

so that they drove heavily; and the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel; for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians." (Ex 14, 19-25).

Until the people reached Mount Sinai, God went before them and showed the way. When they were hungry God rained down Manna from heaven to eat and poured out water from the rock to quench their thirst. They were protected from the enemies (Ex 16-17). Finally they reached the foot of Mount Sinai. They experienced the presence of God through surprising incidents that are explained in Chapter 19 of the book of Exodus.

Ark of the Covenant

The crowd that came out of Egypt became a people under the leadership of Moses through whom God worked. At Mount Sinai through Moses God told them: "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites" (Gen 19, 5-6).

God wrote the conditions of the Covenant the "Ten Commandments", on two stone tablets. Moses was asked to make an "Ark" to keep the tablets of the Commandments and a tent to keep the Ark. Everything was done according to the directions God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 25-27). Chapters 36-38 of the book of Exodus describe how strictly the direction Moses received from God were followed in making each item. The care with which the details

are described in the bible shows how important the Covenant and its Commandments were for the people. The commandments are referred to as Word of God: "And God spoke all these words, saying" (Ex 20,1)- this is how the Bible introduce the ten Commandments. The way the letter to the Hebrews describes the details about the Ark and the Tent is a clear evidence for its importance (Heb 9, 1-10).

Ark means a box. The instructions given in detail for making the ark show how important the Ark is. It is to contain The Tablets of the Covenant. "Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold ... And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you" (Ex 25, 17-21). All these call our attention to the presence of God, represented by the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. In fact it is neither the ark nor the tablets that are important but the Word of God through which God manifests His presence and communicates His Will.

The Ark signifies the presence of God who reveals Himself through the Word. The seat of mercy above the Ark represents the heavenly throne of

God. Inside the Ark, besides the Tablets, there was a bowl of “Manna” and the staff of Aaron (Num 17, 1-11). These three things explain the aim and nature of the Ark. The tablets stand for the precepts of the Covenant and teach what to believe and how to live. The bowl containing Manna helps to remind the protection of God the people experienced during their journey through the desert. The staff of Aaron teaches that authority among the people is given by God: “And on the morrow Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds” (Numb 17,8). . No one takes over the position or execute the laws by himself. The authority comes from God. God makes His presence felt among the people through these three things.

Tent of Meeting

As a place where man meets God, it is called the Tent of Meeting. Since the Ark stands as a witness to the Covenant, it could be called “Tent of Witness”. It was a small “house of God” that could be carried from place to place and so it was a “Portable Sanctuary”. The Tent of Meeting also was made according to the detailed directions of God.

The “Tent” had two parts. The first part is called “Holy of holies”, where the “Ark of the Covenant” was placed. There was nothing else in this part of the Tent. This part is separated with a thick curtain. The second part is called “Holy Place” three important things were placed there. 1. The table of Show-Bread:

- 12 loaves of bread that remind the 12 tribes of Israel are placed on this table; every Sabbath these loaves would be changed. Only those who work in the Temple were allowed to eat that bread (1 Sam 21, 4-6; Mt 12, 3-4). 2. Menorah, the seven branched lamp stand. 3. The “Table of Incense”. Only the priests were allowed to enter the Tent. The people would come to the ground where the Tent is placed and offer their prayers and offerings. God will accept them through the priests and bless them. Thus the “Tent of Meeting” became a place for the people to meet God.

According to the directions given by God, Moses completed the work and once the Tent was erected and consecrated a cloud covered it. “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40, 34). Thus the “Tent” became a sign of the presence of God in the midst of the people. This was an important event and a decisive change in the history of Israel and the chronicle of the “House of God”. Until then the invisible God guided them, but now the presence of God was made visible through a sign, the Tent and the Ark of the Covenant. The expression that God dwells in the Tent might give an impression that the presence of God is limited to the tent. Hence rather than saying God dwelt in the Tent, it was said that “the Glory of God” was in the Tent. It is the Hebrew word *Kabod* that it translated as glory; it stands for the holy and powerful presence of God

God Who Shows the Way

God guided the people all through their journeys;
He showed the way by going ahead of them in a cloud,

and marked for them where to pitch the tent for rest. When they travelled, the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent would go before them. They followed the cloud and where the cloud stopped they would set up their tents. When they set up the tents, the Tent of the Meeting was placed in the middle. God guiding the way is a great event that is vividly depicted in the book of Numbers.

“On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. ... As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp” (Num 9, 15-18). Thus, the presence of the Lord was very active in the midst of the people of Israel.

Slowly the presence of God was associated with the Ark of the Covenant and Tent of meeting. Then an idea developed that the presence of God was limited to the place where the Ark and Tent remained. Hence they concluded that where there is no Ark of the Covenant, God is absent and so they would not get His protection. This belief becomes evident in an episode at Kadesh Bernea.

Hearing the news about the Promised Land from the spies, people got scared and refused to fight and the wrath of God fell upon them. Moses communicated to them the verdict of God: “According to the number of

the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for every day, you shall bear your iniquity for forty years, and you shall know my displeasure. I the LORD have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die” (Num 14, 34-35).

Hearing the verdict the people repented and the next day got ready to fight. Even though Moses objected, they went out to fight: “But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and Moses, had not left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah” (Num 14, 44-45). These episodes vividly express the belief that God’s presence was now considered to be restricted to the Ark and the Tent.

All the decisions of the people were taken in front of the “Tent of meeting”. They worshiped God in the Tent of meeting; they received blessing and punishment from there. Korah and his gang turned against Moses. “Then Korah assembled the whole congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the LORD appeared to the whole congregation” (Num 16, 19). What happened next was punishment. “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households... everyone who belonged to Korah and all their goods... the earth closed over them, and they perished in the midst of the assembly” (Num 16, 32-33).

After wandering in the desert for forty years, the people of Israel entered the Promised Land. After

Moses died, God appointed Joshua as the leader of the people. God said to Joshua, “No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them... I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1, 5-9). Since it is the Lord who would guide their path, the Ark of the Covenant should go ahead of them.

Miraculous Presence

When the people of Israel came to cross the Jordan, the river was overflowing that was an obstacle they could not overcome on the way to the Promised Land. Here they saw the first miracle in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Before that Joshua had instructed them, “Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you” (Joshua 3, 5). The people obeyed him and they witnessed the miracle.

The priests went in front of the people, carrying the Ark of the Covenant. They walked into the river overflowing with strong current. As their feet touched the water, the water stopped flowing and stood as a wall on the Northern side. The water on the south side emptied into the Dead Sea. The people walked through the dry land. The priests stood in front of the wall of water with the Ark, as if to protect the people. They saw the miracle, similar to the one they had seen while crossing the Red Sea.

In memory of this miracle, the people collected 12 stones, one stone for each tribe of Israel, from Jordan and placed them near their camp. Thus the place came to be called Gilgal which means “circle of stones”. Later it became an important Pilgrim Center. God, who was present in the Ark, stopped the water flow (Joshua 3-4). Gilgal was the first stopping place for the Ark of the Covenant in the Promised Land. After that the Ark was kept at various places and all of them became important Pilgrim centers.

The Fortress of Jericho was an insurmountable obstacle for the people to enter the Promised Land. The people of Israel could never overcome that with their own strength. However, as ordered by God, the people followed the priests who were carrying the Ark; in procession they went around the Fortress. On the seventh day when they sounded the trumpet and shouted, the walls of Jericho crumbled. The people of Israel recognized it as the work of God who was present in the Ark. Thus the path to the Promised Land was open. They saw yet another miracle through the Ark and they experienced the presence of God.

After Gilgal, the Ark was kept in various places. The people believed that God was in the Ark. In the beginning of the book of Samuel we see that the Ark was at Shiloh. The pious Israelites made a pilgrimage to Shiloh to experience God’s presence and to receive His blessings. As the book continues to tell the story of the people through various episodes, we see the Ark again and again playing a decisive role in the history of the people.

It was in front of the Ark that Hanna poured out her sorrows, prayed for a child and promised

to offer that child for the service of God (1 Sam 1, 9-18). The Priest Eli who was sitting on a chair at the door post of the tent, thought her to be drunk, but when he realized the truth, blessed her: "Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him."(1Sam 1,17). God fulfilled the blessing and Hanna offered her son, whom she called Samuel, for the service of the Lord. One night, while he was sleeping near the Ark in Shiloh, Samuel heard the voice of God for the first time. With the help of Eli, Samuel recognized that it was God who was calling him and responded, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3, 9). Samuel obeyed and he became the voice of God, led the people and they came to know the presence of God in the Ark.

Making an Idol out of a Holy Object.

The people of Israel had forgotten that the Ark and the Tent of meeting were objects that should remind them of the presence of God. But in the popular mind The Ark was the seat of God and the presence of God was limited to that place. It was this conviction that motivated them to take the Ark into the battlefield when they found it was difficult to defeat the Philistines (1 Sam 4, 1-18). Seeing the Ark the Israelite army rejoiced and became convinced of their victory. But they were defeated by the Philistines who even captured the Ark. They took it to the Temple of their god and placed the Ark there as a trophy of their victory.

Hearing that the Ark was lost, Eli the priest fell down and died of a broken neck. All the people

realized the folly of using a “Holy object” for selfish purposes. Forgetting that the Ark was an object that should remind them to live according to the commandments of the Covenant, they made it an object that would assure them God’s protection; as magical object or an idol. This episode points to the danger of taking a symbol for the reality, as God. But, the people did not learn the lesson.

“When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him” (1 Sam 5, 1- 4). Besides, the Philistines were afflicted by contagious disease. It frightened them and they returned the Ark to Israel.

The Ark reached Beth-shemesh, in Israel, and the inhabitants received it with great joy. But a tragedy frightened them again: “And he slew some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked into the ark of the LORD; he slew seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had made a great slaughter among the people. Then the men of Bethshemesh said, “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go

up away from us?" So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriathjearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you." " (1 Sam 6, 19-21). The people of Beth-shemesh offered the Ark to the people of Kiriathjearim and they came and took it. They placed it in the house of Abinadab, who lived on top of the mountain. One of his sons was anointed as a priest.

In order to seek the will of God in the battle with the Philistines, King Saul asked Ahijah to have the Ark brought to him. "Bring the ark of God here" (1 Sam 14, 18). At that time the Ark was with the Israelites (1 Sam 14, 19). Many Bible scholars conclude that this episode, seen in the Hebrew Bible, was a misunderstanding and they were talking about the "Ephod" rather than the Ark. At that time "Ephod" was used to seek the will of God. Not only that, those who knew what had happened to the Ark in the battle with the Philistines would not have dared for another such attempt. The Bible does not say what happened to the Ark after it was placed in the house of Abinadab until King David came in search of it.

Do not forget the True Goal

God asked Moses to make the Ark and the Tent in order to remind the people about the presence of God in their midst. What is important is not the Ark or the Tent but the presence of God. God made His presence felt among the people by revealing His will through the Commandments that were written on the Tablets placed in the Ark. The Bible called these Commandments, the Word of God. Those tablets had the written Word of God.

The Ten Commandments written on the tablets and preserved in the Ark taught the people who God is, what He wants from them and how they were to live. When forgetting that, they began to use it as miraculous object, the Ark lost its true goal. Then it would become an idol and worshipping it would be idol worship. Next we see how this Ark and Tent developed into a House of God.

3

JERUSALEM TEMPLE

“When the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. Then Solomon said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever” (1 Kgs 8, 10-13).

The Ark was a sign that communicated the Will of God to the people. In the last Chapter we have seen how it reached the house of Abinadab. Later, the Ark and the Tent were brought to Jerusalem. Then in the place of the Tent, a Temple was built and the Ark was placed in the holy of holies of the temple. These events are discussed in this chapter.

The Ark to Jerusalem

As long as Samuel was the leader the Ark and the Tent remained in the house of Abinadab (2 Sam 7, 1). During the time of Saul, it seems that not much importance was given to the Ark. David, who

was fleeing from King Saul who wanted to kill him, reached Ahimalek, the priest at Nob and asked for bread and weapons, to which he replied: "I have no ordinary bread at hand, only holy bread-- provided that the young men have kept themselves from women" (1 Sam 21, 4). This bread was replaced with new ones on every Sabbath. The bread was kept in front of the Ark and so it was considered as sacred. However, the Bible does not say about bringing the Ark to Nob. Not only that, later, David, after securing his kingship, went not to Nob but to the house of Abinadab to bring the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6,1-3) "They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart" (2 Sam 6, 3). This shows that the Ark was kept there until David took it from there.

King David saw the Ark as a sign of the presence of God and having the Ark in Jerusalem would guarantee God's support and protection for him. When David captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of the kingdom, he wished to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. Ark was the symbol and instrument that united the people of Israel. David concluded that having the Ark in Jerusalem would unite the people and give support to his rule. That is why with the accompaniment of 30,000 soldiers, he tried to bring the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6, 1).

David tried to bring it to Jerusalem in a new decorated cart with a great procession. But an unexpected accident confused David. "When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached

out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God” (2 Sam 6, 6-7; 1 Chr 13, 1-14). People got scared, David became disturbed. “So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Hittite. The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Hittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household” (2 Sam 6. 10-11; 1 Chr 13, 13-14).

It was with a good intention that Uzzah touched the Ark but he was killed instantly. His death is still a matter of controversy among Bible Scholars. The sacred author says, “God struck him dead”. There have been many attempts to present this as a historical event. There are some who argue that Uzzah died of heart attack caused by the fear of God. It is impossible to get a satisfactory answer for this and so it might be better to look for the message the sacred author was communicating through it or what lesson is God teaching through this episode.

The most important lesson from this cruel and illogical action is a warning against using God as an object. It is only natural to think that if the Ark of the Covenant is in the capital city, that would ensure the protection of God to the king and to the nation. At the same time there is a danger hidden in this line of thinking. This could lead the people to the conviction that as long as the Ark is there in the town, they will be all safe. Here one is trying to use and manipulate

God for one's own purpose, without asking and trying to learn to what God wants one to do. This belief shifts the focus from God and His will to personal interests and plans; God and His Ark become a means of attaining my goal, not learning God's will for me. Thus the ark becomes a magical object, or an idol. That is what happened late, against which Prophets came with sharp critic and strong warnings.

It is true that respect and honor should not be limited to external activities. At the same time this episode gives a hint about the rules and regulations to be observed in the activities related to the worship of God. No one should approach God without due respect and preparation. The Ark is only a sign of God's presence and His holiness. Nevertheless, it reminds one about the holiness demanded by the presence of God. The signs should not be handled carelessly and that lesson is relevant at all times. Holy things should be handled with care and holiness.

Though the unexpected accident frightened David, when he found out that Obed-edom was blessed by the presence of the Ark, he regained courage. With more care and solemnity, the Ark was brought to Jerusalem. To eliminate the fear of the people and to express his own joy and devotion, David danced, forgetting his position and status. David danced wearing only a loin cloth and that caused his first wife Michal, to feel indignant about the king. She saw it as a cheap show to impress others and expressed her feeling in public, but that made David angry (2 Sam 6, 20-23). He never allowed her to come into his presence again.

The Ark was kept in a specially prepared Tent. David offered sacrifices to God before the Ark. The people were given a sumptuous dinner and all were happy. With that the presence of God in the midst of the people entered into another stage. God who abided in the midst of the people, guided their journey, now settled in the capital city, Jerusalem, they believed. Such a pattern of thinking formed in the heart of the people; with that Jerusalem came to be known as the city of God. As Solomon built the Temple, this faith became much stronger. A belief developed that the presence of God guaranteed unity to the nation and protection to the rule of the king.

From the Tent to the Temple

“Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent” (2 Sam 7, 1-2).

The kingdom was secure. Enemies were eliminated. There were good relationships with the neighboring countries. Palaces were built for the king and his associates. In the Tent that was brought to Jerusalem, David arranged to have sacrifices and other activities. He gave the necessary directions to the Priests and Levites. It was then that the king noticed the difference between the palace he lived in and the Tent where the Ark was kept. Hence, he wished to build a beautiful Temple for the Lord. Prophet Nathan encouraged that desire.

But, the Lord spoke to David through Prophet Nathan, “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and in a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” (2 Sam 7, 6-7). As promised to Moses, God walked with the people; liberated the slaves; chose Israel as His own people through a covenant and decided that His place is in the midst of the people. He would go before them to show the way, behind them to protect them and above them to give them shade. No one can limit His presence to any particular place.

Nathan gave this message to the king. The first Messianic prophecy was given in this context: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2Sam 7,12-13).

The Hebrew word “Beth” appears many times in the prophecy. The word “Beth” can mean palace, house, family and dynasty. David wished to build a house for the Lord but God will build a house for David. It is not just a house, but a royal dynasty that God is going to build for David. God would give David a royal lineage and his throne would last forever. This pointed to the coming of the Messiah, as a descendant,

or son of David. In Jesus who was called the “Son of David” we find the fulfillment of this promise.

God did not reject the idea of the Temple completely as David was told that it will be his son who will build the Temple for the Lord. Thus, the Lord approved the building of the Jerusalem Temple. David felt happy that the Temple he could not build will be constructed by his son. Hence he made all the necessary preparations for the building of the Temple (1 Chr 22, 28-29).

Building experts were appointed to collect the needed wood, stone, metals and all the material for the construction of the Temple. We can get an idea of the preparations from what David told Solomon: “With great pains I have provided for the house of the LORD one hundred thousand talents of gold, one million talents of silver, and bronze and iron beyond weighing, for there is so much of it; timber and stone too I have provided. To these you must add more” (1 Chr 22, 14). A talent is 34.5 Kg. That would David show that he had collected about 3,500 ton gold and 35,000 ton silver. This might be an exaggerated account, but it gives an impression about the importance David and Solomon gave to the building of the Temple.

The author of the book of Chronicles has described the way David collected the materials for the Temple. Since Solomon was inexperienced, the needed preparation was done by the father. A large amount from the treasury was set aside for the building of the Temple. To ensure the participation of the people in the process, they were asked to give donations as much as possible. It also points to the heavy load the king imposed on the people. Building

of the Temple became a burden for the people and it became even heavier by the time Solomon completed the building. Eventually it led to a great protest against the king.

After the death of David, Solomon built the Temple according to the directions and desire of David. A detailed description of the building of the Temple is given in 1Kings 5-8 and 2Chron 2-7. About the choice of the place for the building of the temple there is the story of David taking a census of the people which was forbidden in Israel, (which) and was severely punished by an epidemic that lasted for three days. "But when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented of the evil, and said to the angel who was bringing destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand". The angel of the LORD was then by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite" (2 Sam 24, 16). Here the owner of the threshing floor is called Araunah the Jebusite, but in 1Chron 21,18 he is called Ornan the Jebusite. Bible scholars are of the opinion that both refer to the same person who was called in different names. David purchased the threshing floor though Araunah had offered to give it as a free gift. David said to him, "No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam 24, 24). The attitude of David is a model for all. The amount paid is given differently in 2 Samuel 24, 24 and 1 Chronicle 21, 25. In Samuel it is written that David paid 50 Shekel while the Chronicle recorded that he paid 600 shekel gold.

“Then David said, “Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel” (1 Chr 22, 1). Solomon built the Temple in the place where David offered a Thanksgiving Sacrifice. A wide area was set aside for the Temple and that included the place where the Tent of the meeting was set up and the threshing floor of Araunah. The statement, “Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had designated, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite” (2 Chr 3,1), leaves no doubt about the location of the Temple Solomon built.

Solomon completed the project prepared by his Father, David. The construction lasted for seven years and unlimited personnel and money were used for it. Special wood, stones and other metals were imported from foreign countries. Cedar and cypress were brought from Tyre. “Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty thousand cores of wheat as food for his household, and twenty cores of fine oil. Solomon gave this to Hiram year by year” (1 Kgs 5, 11). to cut the wood and stone, King Solomon brought slaves from every part of Israel. “ King Solomon raised a levy of forced labor out of all Israel; and the levy numbered thirty thousand men. He sent them to the Lebanon, ten thousand a month in shifts; they would be a month in the Lebanon and two months at home; Adoniram was in charge of the labor force. Solomon also had seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon's three thousand three hundred supervisors who were over the work, having charge of the people who did the work” (1 Kings 5, 13-16).

Solomon built and consecrated a beautiful Temple for the Lord. The inside was made with special wood and it was covered with gold. Precious stones were inlaid in them. It was one of the wonders in the world. There was no other building that was so costly. As the construction was completed and the Ark was placed in the holy of holies, a cloud that was the sign of the presence of God covered the Temple. The King and the people were jubilant.

After the consecration of the Temple, Solomon offered a long prayer (1 Kings 8, 22-61) which spelt out the meaning, goal and his hopes and expectations about the Temple. Though he built the Temple as the House of God, he confessed many times during the prayer that God dwells in heaven, and is not limited to any particular place (1 Kgs 8, 32-34, 36-39, 43-49). He reminded the people that the manmade house, no matter how beautiful and expensive it may be, is only a sign of the presence of God and a place for encountering God. The presence of God cannot be limited to the Temple. But, gradually the people and the leaders forgot this truth. Seeking the presence of God, people came to Jerusalem as it became the sole Pilgrim Center in Israel.

Pilgrimages

Visiting Jerusalem Temple at least once in life was considered as a great blessing by the people. The festal celebrations, sacrifices and other religious activities in the Temple gave them a heavenly experience. This experience and the importance of the Temple are expressed through many Psalms. Six Psalms are

known as Zion Psalms (46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122). Many other Psalms also highlight the importance of the Temple where people experienced consolation, joy and hope. Pilgrims tried to reach the Temple, overcoming all kinds of obstacles. In all their difficulties and suffering, the Temple gave them courage, consolation and hope. “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult... God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Ps 46, 2-7).

In B.C. 702, the Assyrian army attacked Jerusalem and set siege to the city but God miraculously saved the city. “That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies” (2 Kgs 19, 35). The king of Assyria and the army returned home. With that event the faith of the people increased. They firmly believed that God will protect the Temple always, and as long as the Temple is there the people and the land would be safe.

Such faith is reflected in the Psalms. “Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense. Then the kings assembled, they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic, they took to flight” (Ps 48, 3-5).

The whole Psalm 84 praises the glory of the Jerusalem Temple. Temple is the dwelling place of God and being there would mean being with God. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God" (Ps 84, 1-2). This is the attitude of the one making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The devotee seeks and dreams of this joy of being in the Temple. "For a day in your court is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness" (Ps 84, 10).

"I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" (Ps 122, 1). The city was beautiful and the fortress was strong. Beauty of the Temple was beyond words to describe. All these gave joy to the heart of the devotee. Hence they came with great joy and desire to be in the Temple. They wished they could stay, even if in a little corner in courtyard of the Temple forever. With great enthusiasm and joy, they sang the praises of the Temple.

Missing the Goal

The Temple Solomon built, no matter how strong and beautiful, was only a sign. What is important, is neither the Temple nor the Ark but the presence of God and a life according to the Commandments of the Covenant. God had clearly communicated this to Solomon in the beginning of the construction of the Temple and also after the Consecration.

"Now the word of the LORD came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you

will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel” (1 Kgs 6, 11-13). A life according to the precepts of the Covenant is the most important. Without that the Temple would have no value.

God repeated this promise with a warning after the consecration of the Temple was completed: “If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?’” (1 Kgs 9, 6-8). But the warnings were ignored and they did not pay any attention to the Word of the Lord.

Solomon built the temple in seven years and then it took thirteen years to complete the construction of palaces for him and his family (1 Kgs 7, 1). The people had to pay a high price for all these constructions. When he could not pay off the debts, he sold even a part of the country: “At the end of twenty years, in which Solomon had built the two houses, the house of the LORD and the king's house, King Hiram of Tyre having supplied Solomon with cedar and cypress

timber and gold, as much as he desired, King Solomon gave to Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee. But when Hiram came from Tyre to see the cities that Solomon had given him, they did not please him. Therefore he said, "What kind of cities are these that you have given me, my brother?" So they are called the land of Cabul to this day. But, Hiram had sent to the king one hundred twenty talents of gold" (1 Kgs 9, 10-14). Solomon was a man of great wisdom but the people could not bear his rule. Towards the end of his life, the signs of a great revolt began to brew in Israel but, he suppressed it with heavy hand.

With the death of Solomon the suppressed fury of the people burst out like a volcano. The imprudent behavior of King Rehoboam, son of Solomon, poured oil into the fire. The country was split, Israel was divided into two (1 Kings 12) in B.C. 931. Ten tribes of Israel broke away from the king, and formed another kingdom, named Israel, the Northern kingdom. In the South, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained as one kingdom, called Judah. Jerusalem was its capital, the political and religious center of the people.

Jeroboam who led the revolt became the king of the Northern kingdom, Israel. But, he was afraid that the people might eventually reject him and join Judah. He was insecure of his position for he was only a supervisor of slaves. Hence he executed a wise plan: "So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt;" he set one in Bethel, and the other in Dan" (1 Kings 12, 28-29).

Political gain was the sole motivating force behind this move; there was no interest in pilgrimage, seeking the presence of God or desire to worship the Lord. Jeroboam was afraid that if the people go to Jerusalem, they would eventually reject him and join Judah and accept the son of David as their king. This prompted him to build a place of worship in Dan, in the northern boundary and in Bethel, the southern boundary of Israel, on the way to Jerusalem. Here we can see clearly how religion is being manipulated for political purposes. The sacred author does not say if David or Solomon had such a hidden motive while building Jerusalem Temple though ultimately it happened.

People began to believe that God was dwelling in the innermost, dark room, called the holy of holies. Sacrifices and other religious activities confirmed this belief. The people began to feel that to be near to God, they had to come to the Temple and when they come they should not be empty handed. They must bring offerings in proportion to the blessing they wished to receive from the Lord. The Priests and the Levites added fuel to this belief. Slowly two very wrong and dangerous concepts developed.

The first one was that God was only in the Temple. This convinced them that God was not in their midst and He would not see anything they do or the things that happen to them. This erroneous way of thinking created a big gap between religiosity and moral life. The second concept was that God would bless them only in proportion to the offering they make. The accuracy of liturgical rubrics and purity and quantity and value of the things offered became

focal point. Attention shifted from renewal of life to religious practices.

Psalm 15 presents an attempt to resist these two erroneous developments. It teaches the devotee who is worthy to come to the Temple and what one must do to experience the presence of God. It reminds the pilgrims to be aware of eleven things: 1. Be prepared to walk blamelessly. 2. Do what is right. 3. Speak only the truth. 4. Do not gossip against others. 5. Do no evil to their friends. 6. Do not take up a reproach against their neighbors. 7. Stay away from the wicked. 8. Honor those who fear the LORD. 9. Stand by their oath even at the point of suffering loss of life. 10. Do not take interest for the money lent. 11. Do not accept bribe. Only those who obey these regulations should come near the Temple. It was a clear and strong teaching but it did not produce much result. As the many other empty practices, these songs were sung only for celebration. It was in this situation that powerful prophets came on the scene with the undiluted Word of God, as burning fire and shattering hammer.

4

TEMPLE IN THE EYES OF THE PROPHETS

The Bible depicts two different views of the Prophets concerning the Temple. These views are not contradictory but complimentary. The first view is that God permitted and blessed the Jerusalem Temple. This was told through Prophet Nathan. Twice God appeared to Solomon and gave him blessing, warning and directions. According to this view, the presence of God is evident in Jerusalem Temple. This view becomes even clearer when Prophet Isaiah, the prophet of holiness, describes the call he received.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’. The pivots on the thresholds

shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke” (Is 6, 1-4). The prophet describes through symbols the God experience he had while he was in the Temple. He became aware that the presence of God filled the Temple, an experience similar to the one that reminds of what happened when Solomon consecrated the Temple: “when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1Kings 8,10-11).

However, a different view is presented by most of the other prophets. They proclaimed that a life according to the precepts of the Covenant is more important than the Temple, the sacrifices, prayers and songs. If the religious activities in the Temple are not supported with a life based on justice and mercy towards the needy, the rituals will be meaningless. Instead of worshiping God, by these activities they will be insulting Him. This is the view most of the prophets presented before the people.

These two views are not necessarily contradictory. People are called to live a life according to the commandments of God and also to grow in mutual love, while living a just life rooted in faith and filled with devotion to the religious practices. The religious observances should be an external expression of their life according the commandments of the Covenant, that calls for justice to the poor and care for the needy. When the people live that way the Temple and all the religious practices will be relevant and meaningful. But when there is no relationship

between the life and devotion, the Temple loses its relevance. Most of the 16 writing prophets held this view. Given below is a short analysis of the attitude the Prophets had taken towards the Temple.

Amos

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, a village south of Jerusalem. Towards the second part of the rule of Jeroboam II (BC 783-743), most probably in 760, he came to Bethel and started his prophetic ministry that lasted only a few weeks. Though his ministry was very short, from his words we can gain some very important insights about the “House of God”.

Jeroboam I, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, built Temples in Bethel and Dan and introduced religious services, to discourage the people from going to Jerusalem. Dan was on the north end of the country, while Bethel was on the southern border, on the way to Jerusalem. Later these places became Pilgrim Centers. There was another shrine at Gilgal, the first place where the ark was kept on entering the Promised land and sacrifices were offered (Jos 5,10-12). Amos in strong language proclaimed that none of those pilgrimages, sacrifices and festivals will be pleasing to God. He shouted, “Come to Bethel- and transgress; to Gilgal- and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days” (Amos 4, 4).

The word “transgress” is the translation of the Hebrew word “Pasha” which means to transgress, violate the law, cross the boundary, enter forbidden area etc. It is a verb form. Its noun form Pasha

is translated as sin. The prophet sees the very act of making a pilgrimage to these centers as sin, because they have broken the commandments of the Covenant. After breaking the commandments of God purposely, going to the Temple and participating in the Sacrifice were seen as grave sins.

Amos clearly taught that if one thinks that one can please God by participating in the religious activities, while disregarding the will of God and disobeying the commandments, one is foolish. He announced, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5, 21-23). The Prophet used powerful words such as hate, despise, will not listen. These are words that would frighten the pilgrims. These warnings were given immediately after saying that for the unjust even going to the Temple itself is a sin.

What does God want the people to do? The Prophet had a very clear response for it. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5, 24). This translation does not express the force given in the original. Two words are used to express what God expects from the people, namely Justice and righteousness. The Hebrew word Mishpath is translated as justice. It points to the vindication of justice through the court of law. When someone has been wronged it is the duty of the

law court and judges to redress the injustice. The second word is Zedaqa, translated as righteousness. It points to the state of being where the just laws are respected and everyone gets his due, where the right relationship exists between people, between the nature and the people and above all with God.”. The justice executed through a life according to the commandments of God is envisaged here. The verbs also need special attention. The expression “roll down like waters” points to mighty flood that wipes out every obstacle on the way - it should be so powerful. Nothing should prevent or stand in the way of executing justice to the people, especially to the poor. The expression “ever-flowing” points to the continuity of this process of executing justice. It should not be a one time or sporadic act, but a continuous state of life and governance. Without justice there is no meaning in having the Temples and sacrifices.

A Temple that approves and encourages such a life of injustice will be destroyed by God. No one can attain salvation by participating in religious activities, without leading a life of justice. “I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said: Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and those who are left I will kill with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape. Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them”

(Amos 9, 1-3). The very thought that one can be pleasing to God and obtain His favors with religious practices and cultic activities without living a life according to his commandments is wrong and dangerous.

This is a frightening picture. God Himself pulling down the dome of the Temple and crush to death those who come seeking His blessing. God will not allow them to escape. Anyone could ask if going to the place of worship is such a grave sin! But there is no doubt in the view of the Prophet. Without leading a just life, engaging in religious activities would bring down not the blessing but the wrath of God. This is a warning relevant at all times.

The activities of Amos did not last long. The prophecies in Bethel caused strong opposition. The priest of Bethel complained to the king and Amos was forbidden from preaching, or he was silenced with force. "Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, `Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land. And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." (Am 7,10-13). Many think that he was not only prevented from preaching in Bethel but he was brutally murdered. But cry for justice did not end as Prophet Hosea who came behind him took over the mission

Hosea

About ten years after Amos was silenced, there came another mighty prophet on the scene, Hosea (B.C. 750-720). He also preached in the Northern kingdom, Israel. While Amos is known, as the prophet of social justice Hosea is known as the prophet of the love of God. He is generally considered to be a priest. There are no other prophets in the bible who spoke so strongly against the priests and their failures.

The Temple and the liturgical functions should lead the people to a life according to the Commandments of God, to love God and fellow human beings. The main duty of the priests was to teach the people the commandments of God, and thus enable them to lead a life acceptable and pleasing to God. But God announced through Hosea that this was not happening.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing” (Hos 4, 1-3). There was no shortage of beautiful Temples or prayers. The Prophet accuses the people and their leaders that they are breaking every one of the commandments of God. Therefore the land is mourning and the nature expresses its protest through drought, flood and earthquake.

Who is responsible for all these? The main reason for all these crimes is that people do not know God. Even when they are celebrating pilgrimages, festivals, and sacrifices, they do not know whom they are worshiping and trying to please. This was a serious accusation. What did he mean by “no knowledge of God in the land”? Before responding to this question, we have to see who is God in the Bible. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20, 1). God hears the cry of blood; He listens to the misery of the slaves and comes down to rescue them. With a mighty hand He liberated the slaves and brought them to the Promised Land. To know God, we have to know his will, live according to the Commandments. The Temple, Priests and religious rituals must help the people to know God and to live according to His Commandments. Who is now guilty of failing in this responsibility?

“Let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hos 4, 4-6). Knowledge of God is the beginning of Wisdom and the main duty of the Priests is to help people to come to know God. But the Priests immersed in materialism and looking for personal gains of wealth and popularity became the supporters of the corrupt political leaders. Forgetting God and His Commandments, the land was filled with corruption and injustice. However,

the pilgrimages and festivals continued. All those activities became a means to accumulate wealth, exploiting the people.

“Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king! For the judgment pertains to you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor, and a pit dug deep in Shittim; but I will punish all of them” (Hos 5, 1-2). The lack of knowing God is the main reason of all evils in the land, according to Hosea. “Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. As robbers lie in wait for someone, so the priests are banded together; they murder on the road to Shechem, they commit a monstrous crime.” (Hos 6, 8-9). It does not mean that the priests were literally killing people. But the brutal exploitation, propaganda of a wrong religiosity focusing on material gain, the loss the people incurred both on the religious and financial sides, the unjust profit made by the religious and politic leaders – These are the points the prophet is calling attention to.

A superficial conversion, like the dew that disappears in the morning, will not be a remedy. The statement, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6, 6), gives certain basic awareness about the life of the people, Temple and sacrifices. The Hebrew word “Hezed” is translated as love here. It means unlimited love, a love that never changes; the kind of love God has for the people, a love that is guaranteed by the Covenant.

When the prophet says “knowing God is more important than burnt offerings”, more importance

is given to a life according to the Commandments of God. God desires not the worldly knowledge but the wisdom that comes from experience and that is earned through obedience. No one can know God without obeying the Commandments, without doing the will of God and without walking through the path He shows us. The devotional rituals should help people to lead a just life but that did not happen.

“Set the trumpet to your lips, for a vulture is over the house of the LORD, because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my law. (Hos 8,1). The vulture comes where there are dead bodies. Hence the implication of the prophecy is this: the Temple will be destroyed, all who are inside would be killed, and they would become prey for the vultures. It is a frightening scene. It could have been avoided if the people were to repent and obey the commandments of God, but it did not happen; the priests did not help the people in this regard “Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning, they have become to him altars for sinning”. (Hos 8,11).

At the end it happened. In B.C. 724 Assyria attacked Israel. Egypt did not come to help them. After one and a half years of siege, Samaria fell and the people were deported as slaves. Ten tribes of Israel vanished forever. This was caused by their refusal to listen to the Prophets. They did not pay attention to the warnings of the Prophets but continued to celebrate festivals and empty rituals. At the end they had to suffer the consequences foretold by the prophets.

This was a disaster that happened in the 8th century B.C. in Israel. It could happen again in our midst. We see signs in the present world,

much stronger than what Amos and Hosea saw in Israel. The gap between devotion and life of justice is widening. Houses of worship have become more beautiful and the pinnacles have become higher. When the leadership focuses on festivals and celebrations, they fail to see the increasing violence and corruption in the nation.

Micah

Amos and Hosea preached in the Northern kingdom, Israel and dealt with the situation that existed in that country. They spoke against the idol worship in the Temples Jeroboam built. Hence it could be argued that their preaching did not apply to the Jerusalem Temple that was approved by God and the religious activities conducted there. But, we can say that the same position was taken by the prophets from Judah. That is the next subject of discussion.

Micah was a contemporary of Hosea and preached in Judah, the southern kingdom. From the main focus of the message as well as the style of preaching it is generally concluded that Micah was a farmer. The book introduces Micah as coming from Moresheth, (Mic 1,1) a village south west of Jerusalem. He had experienced the exploitation and miseries of the ordinary people, and how they became so poor through the corrupt behavior of the political authority. The rich joined the political leaders to exploit the poor ordinary people. He spoke against it strongly and accused the authority, listing their crimes.

“Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet

fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance” (Mic 2, 1-2). He announced that such cruel deeds would invite the punishment of God on their house. “Therefore thus says the LORD: Behold, against this family I am devising evil, from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time” (Mic2,3) . The word family is a translation of the Hebrew word Mishpaha which could mean, clan, tribe or father’s house. It could mean the tribe of Judah; but one could see a veiled reference to the Temple of Jerusalem that was accepted as the dwelling place of God. We can see very clear warnings of Micah about the destruction of the temple, to which we shall come in a moment. But before that we see his critic against the leaders, especially the unscrupulous rich who brutally exploit the poor.

“You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron” (Mic 3,2-3). These accusations are leveled against the leaders. His words were sharp; they were soaked in tears and wet with the blood of farmers. He does not mince his words, but gives free flow to the pent up grief and grievances of the poor, among whom he counted himself as one. We can see a clear picture of the brutal exploitation and merciless torture the poor people were subjected to.

He continued his tirade against the leaders. All including the priests and prophets were subjects of his severe criticism. He is exposing the folly and futility

of their faith that God was with them and nothing would happen to them. “Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us” (Mic 3, 9-11). The religious structure was used for injustice and exploitation. As long as the Jerusalem Temple existed, this exploitation would continue and give a false sense of security to the people. Hence, he placed the axe at the root of this erroneous attitude and false security.

“Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and the mountain of the house a wooded height” (Mic 3, 12). In the heart of the people the words of Micah made a deep impression. The same words were repeated by Prophet Jeremiah, one and a half century later and for that they tried to kill him. At that time some leaders citing the example of Prophet Micah, argued in favor of Jeremiah (Jer 26, 18). When the Temple that should have been the center to instruct the people to lead a just life and to obey the commandments of God becomes a den of corrupt priests and leaders who behave like robbers, then that Temple has no reason or right to exist. God will destroy it. The words Amos spoke at Bethel are repeated by Micah in Jerusalem.

How can then the people be saved? How can they please God? What kind of sacrifices and offerings should be made? These were the questions of the

devotees to which Micah gives the direct answer. “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6, 6-8).

The offerings people must give to God are justice, mercy and humility. God does not need anything else from the people. The devotee is willing to give anything, grain, oil, animals and even his own son. In the bible we can see instances of human sacrifice (2 Kings 21, 5-6). But God wants none of it. What He wants is a renewed life expressed through justice, mercy to the needy and fidelity to God.

Though the Prophet foretold the destruction of the Temple, he knew that it would not be the end of the history. God will enter into the history and bring an end to injustice. A just king would come and he will be born in Bethlehem. “O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD

his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth” (Mi 5, 2-4). Then Jerusalem will become the center of the world. People will come in pilgrimage to Jerusalem searching for the will of God and His presence. “He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken” (Mi 4, 2-5).

There will be lasting peace and there will be no war any more. Weapons of war will be transformed into tools of agriculture. This will be the result of a life according to the Commandments of God. This is an eschatological prophecy, a vision concerning the end of time. The contemporary reality for Micah and his audience, will be days of severe persecution and merciless exploitation. There was no change for that state. The city of Jerusalem and Temple were destroyed in B.C. 587. Before that many more Prophets came with similar messages

Isaiah

Isaiah was a contemporary of Micah. The longest book of Prophets with 66 chapters bears his name. The book consists of three parts, 1-39; 40-55; and 56-66, each of which is attributed to a different prophet, who worked in three different periods, who for convenience's sake are called Proto

Isaiah(BC.750-700), Deutero Isaiah(BC 550-540) and Trito Isaiah(BC 520-500). Of these the first part is the subject of discussion here.

The prophetic life of Isaiah began with a heavenly experience while he was in the Jerusalem Temple: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6,1-3). In the presence of God, Isaiah becoming aware of his sinfulness was frightened: "And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" . But God purified and strengthened him and made him His prophet. Isaiah is known as the prince of Prophets and is considered as the Prophet of God's holiness.

God is holy and so His people also should be holy. First of all, the prophet teaches what it means to be holy and how to become holy. Here the Prophet points out what was lacking in the religious life of the people and the danger of performing cultic activities without caring to lead a life according to the commandments of God. The one, who received the call in the Temple, before anything else, turned his attention to the hypocrisy of religious practices in the Temple that create wrong convictions among the people.

The Prophet listed his accusations against the people calling heaven and earth as witness who see

everything: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged" (Is 1,2-4). The prophet accuses the people of having forgotten, rejected and insulted God. Even when the Prophet laments that the people have moved away from God, there was no shortage of cultic activities and religious celebrations. The Prophet stated in no uncertain terms that liturgical activities without a life according to the Commandments of God are not worship but insult to God.

The Prophet compared the people of Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that were consumed by fire due to their wickedness. He told them that their pilgrimage, worship and celebrations are not acceptable to God. "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your

appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (Is 1, 10-15).

It was not the blood of the animals sacrificed that stained their hands but the blood of the innocent and helpless, poor people, like the hands of Cain. The prophet listed seven things they must do in order to purify their hands and to make their offerings and prayers acceptable to God. 1. Wash yourselves; 2. Make yourselves clean; 3. Remove your evil doings; 4. Cease to do evil; 5. Learn to do good; seek justice; 6. Rescue the oppressed 7. Defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Is 1, 16-17). All these could be summarized in one word – Justice- Justice for the poor who are at the bottom of the social scale. The orphans and widows are their representatives. Only if they are willing for such a change in life, will they become acceptable to God.

After convicting the people of very serious crimes, God invites them through the prophet to a thorough conversion: “Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Is 1,18). If they are not ready for such a thorough renewal of life, they would face total disaster. After giving strong warning to the leaders who exploit and persecute the poor, Isaiah presents a dream about Jerusalem, here called Zion, that would be just and holy. “Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent, by righteousness” (Is 1, 27).

Just as Hosea and Micah, Isaiah also kept the hope for a beautiful future. It was an eschatological vision. “The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!” (Is 2, 1-5). The Prophet knew that it will not happen immediately. What he saw in front of him for the moment was total darkness, forsaken by the Lord; a people who are not ready for conversion would receive severe punishment.

The destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian captivity were part of that punishment. However Isaiah kept the hope that the destruction will not be the last word for Jerusalem. God would act beyond that, would send a Messiah to save the people (Is 7, 14; 9,1-7; 11, 1-9). But the impending disaster was the immediate concern of the Prophet; his speeches reflect that concern (3, 5; 10, 22). “...the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they stagger with strong drink; they err

in vision, they stumble in giving judgment” (Is 28, 7). A Temple that has become the center of immorality cannot last long. God will wipe away the meaningless religious practices and corrupt institutions. This was a serious warning, which is relevant at all times.

Jeremiah:

The prophetic messages of Isaiah and Micah did not create any change in the society. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, the Southern Kingdom, Judah lasted for another one and a half centuries, preserving nominal freedom. In B.C. 598, Babylon captured Jerusalem, plundered the Temple and the city and took thousands as prisoners to Babylon. Judah was asked to pay a large amount as tribute to Babylon. After four years, Judah stopped paying the tribute, calculating that Babylon engaged in civil war will not come back. Even if they come, Judah thought they can defend themselves with the help of Egypt. Against all the expectations, Babylon came back, not to defeat but to destroy.

They laid siege to Jerusalem in 588. King Zedekiah with some of his body guards tried to flee but the Babylonian army caught them. “Then they captured the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence upon him. They slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters, and took him to Babylon” (2Kings 25,6-7). Behind him there were thousands of Jews taken as prisoners and deported to Babylon.

The Babylonian army demolished the walls of Jerusalem; the Temple was burned (2 Kgs 25, 1-7).

Thus, the prophecies of Micah became a reality. Captivity and Exile in Babylon started. Jeremiah, son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests in Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin, witnessed the entire disaster (Jer 1, 1). The prophetic activity of Jeremiah lasted 40 years and they were filled with conflict for the Word of Gold.

The prophetic ministry of Jeremiah started during the reign of King Josiah who ruled Judah from B.C. 640 to 609. Jeremiah received his call around B.C. 626 when he was below twenty years of age. He was disturbed by the call because he felt the responsibility entrusted was too heavy for him. He tried to evade the call, saying he did not have much experience, but God had taken hold of him. "Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations". Then I said, 'Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy'. But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD'. Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1,4-10). The words placed on his lips burned like burning coal.

In the beginning Jeremiah was well accepted by the people, until King Josiah died in 609 in war. The

time Josiah ruled over Judah was a time of religious reform. Idol worship was banned in Jerusalem and all of Judah. Sacrifices were limited to the Temple of Jerusalem. Local sanctuaries and shrines were closed and people were forced to come to Jerusalem as pilgrims as it was the only Temple in the kingdom. The law concerning the centralization of worship in Jerusalem reported in Deut 12 is believed to have originated during the time of Josiah: “you shall seek the place which the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there; thither you shall go, and thither you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the offering that you present, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herd and of your flock” (Deut 12,5-6; see also 12,11-14).

King Josiah tried to make the people live a life according to the Commandments of God. Jeremiah was happy to co-operate with the king. The prophet recalls this initial experience with nostalgia: “Thy words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts” (Jer 15, 16).

But this joy did not last long. Religious renewal ended with the death of King Josiah. The new king, together with the prophets and priests went back to the old ways. Jeremiah had to stand alone. He ended up being a one man army against all the leaders and the people. The Lord had already told him about it at the time of the call: “But you, gird up

your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land-- against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you” (Jer 1, 17-19).

The Lord kept His word. There were severe conflicts and the leaders turned against Jeremiah. He was beaten, imprisoned, thrown in the cistern but God did not allow them to kill him. The hand of the Lord was with him at all times. But he suffered severe persecution, rejection and betrayal. The passages called the laments of Jeremiah, paints a clear picture of the persecution and atrocities he had to go through: “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.” (Jer 4,19). It was only the beginning of his torments and sufferings. Passages such as Jeremiah 4, 23-28; 8, 18-9, 3; 15, 10-21; 16, 1-9; 20, 7-8; 20, 12 are a few examples. Why did all the people turn against Jeremiah?

The main reason was the words God placed in his mouth. Those words exposed the crimes, failures and hypocrisy of the people as a whole. The most important and decisive among them were the prophecies he made about Jerusalem Temple. God asked him to speak standing at the door of the Temple, to the people coming as pilgrims. “Hear the word of the LORD, all you people

of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'. For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place,... Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"... Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?... And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house ... just what I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight" (Jer 7, 1-15).

The leaders did not like the prophecies about the impending disaster and the call to conversion. They understood that they were guilty of making the Temple a den of robbers and so when Jeremiah said those words it disturbed them and they saw Jeremiah as their enemy. The example of Shiloh hinted at the impending destruction of Jerusalem Temple. The leaders did not respond immediately but those warnings and accusations were repeated again.

Again as the Lord ordered him, Jeremiah stood at the door of the Temple and announced the imminent disaster that will fall upon Judah. “At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Juda... You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently-- though you have not heeded--then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth” (Jer 26, 1-6). Hearing this, the priests and the people joined force and told Jeremiah that he has to die because he said that Jerusalem Temple will become like Shiloh. “Then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, “You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, "This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant?"” (Jer 26, 8-9). But, Jeremiah was not ready to dilute the Word of God, even if he had to die. He insisted that they must repent and renew their lives, forsake the evil ways and live according to the Commandments of the Lord. If they do, the punishment will not fall on the people. But, if they did not make the necessary changes in their lives the disaster will surely fall on them.

“But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears”. Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the

prophets, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God” (Jer 26, 14-16). The people accepted the words of Jeremiah as the Words of the Lord and protected him. Thus, he escaped the death sentence but he had to remain in prison until the Babylonian army captured the city and set him free (Jer 36-39).

All that Jeremiah prophesied did happen with all its horror and brutality. The people and Jeremiah witnessed the disaster in its full force. The city was ruined and the Temple was burned down but the Babylonians freed Jeremiah from the prison. Before Jerusalem was totally destroyed, Jeremiah predicted the day God will enter into the history of Jerusalem. God will renew the human nature that has become weak by sin and He will make a new Covenant with the people that will be written not on tablets of stone but in the hearts of the people.

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...” (Jer 31, 31-37). They had to wait six centuries for that prophecy to become a reality in Jesus Christ. What loomed large in front of the people who listened to Jeremiah were disaster, exile and slavery. It happened because they instead of trying to live according to the Commandments of God, focused on religious practices. It is a warning that is relevant at all times.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel who was a priest in Jerusalem has spoken about the Temple more than any other prophets. In B.C. 597, Babylon captured Jerusalem and took thousands as prisoners. Ezekiel was one among those deported prisoners. Ten years later the Babylonian army returned to Jerusalem and destroyed it. Again thousands were taken as prisoners and deported to Babylon. The first part of the activities of Ezekiel reported in chapters 1-33 falls between these two events. In this part the words and deeds of the prophet were mostly denunciations, call to conversion and warnings about punishment. In the second part, reported in chapters 34-48, that came after the fall of Jerusalem, his words were that of consolation and promises that would instill hope in the hearts of the people. In both parts there are long sections dealing with the Temple.

The prophet tells how his ministry began while in Babylon: "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (Eze 1, 1). He used mostly the language of visions, auditions and symbolic actions that would help the audience to understand the meaning.

As the beginning of his call Ezekiel describes a vision he had about God while he was in Babylon: "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire,

something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures.... As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being... In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire.... When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved.... Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber...This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking” (Eze 1, 4-28). This vision reveals that the presence of God is not limited to Jerusalem. Storm, chariot, wheels etc. point to speed. The prophet emphasizes the fact that God is present everywhere at all the times. God is beyond the time and space.

Three chapters (Ezek 8 - 10) are set aside for the description of the Jerusalem Temple. Here also Ezekiel uses the language of vision. The Temple is desecrated through idol worship. The priests who placed idols in the Temple and, following the pagan practice of worship and offered sacrifices to those idols were responsible for this desecration. This idol worship was equivalent to a public rejection of the true God; even more, this was insulting and provoking the Lord. Hence the prophet announced that the punishment from the part of the Lord was imminent. These chapters describe in detail the vision of the Glory of the Lord leaving the temple reluctantly and how the punishment is carried out starting

with the priests serving in the Temple. Chapter 8 describes the various practices of idol worship in the Temple, which is followed by the vision of six angels who carry out the order of the Lord to exterminate all the idol worshipers. The massacre was preceded by separating the innocent from those guilty of idol worship by placing a mark on their forehead.

The Word of the Lord came as a warning to prepare the people for the coming punishment: “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (Eze 9, 4). Six people carrying mortal weapons executed the punishment. Kill all without mercy but do not touch those who have the mark on their foreheads. “To the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark. And begin at my sanctuary”. So they began with the elders who were in front of the house” (Eze 9, 5-6).

This vision was a symbolic presentation of the disaster that was to come. The Prophet had repeatedly told the people that all these disasters are caused by the cruelty, injustice and idol worship in Judah. When the six angels completed the execution of the punishment, something more terrible happened; The Lord abandoned the Temple and went away.

The departure of the Lord from the Temple is vividly depicted in Chapter 10. The Cherubim who carry the throne walked out of the “holy of holies” and

stood at the threshold of the Temple (Eze 10, 4-19). Then the glory of God moved to the city. “Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. And the glory of the LORD ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city. The spirit lifted me up and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen left me” (Eze 11, 22-24). This vision gives the impression that it was with reluctance and step by step, that the Lord left the dwelling place he had chosen. Idol worship and injustice all through the Land forced the Lord to leave the center of such activities, the Temple.

In Chapter 22, the prophet describes in detail what is it that forces the saving presence of the Lord out of the midst of the people. Ezekiel has presented a long list of sins and crimes of the people in this chapter that starts addressing Jerusalem as bloody city: "And you, son of man, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city? Then declare to her all her abominable deeds. You shall say, thus says the Lord GOD: A city that sheds blood in the midst of her, that her time may come, and that makes idols to defile herself! (Ezek 22, 2-3).

“You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and defiled by the idols that you have made; you have brought your day near, the appointed time of your years has come. Therefore I have made you a disgrace before the nations, and a mockery to all the countries. Those who are near and those who are far from you will mock you, you infamous

one, full of tumult. The princes of Israel in you, everyone according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you.... In you, they take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbors by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord GOD....Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it. It's priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; ... The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress" (Ezek 22, 4-29).

The accusations were very clear and they were proved without a shadow of doubt. It was the corruption of the authority and people that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophet concludes the denunciations with what sounds like a lamentation: "I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one" (Eze 22.30). It reminds One, of Abraham interceding before the Lord for the city of Sodom: "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there". He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (Gen 18, 32). Jeremiah would take up the same message in his critic against Jerusalem: "Run to and

fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth-- so that I may pardon Jerusalem” (Jer 5, 1). Prophet Ezekiel was saying the same thing: “And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none” (Ezek 22,30). There was not even one just person in the whole city. The only thing now left is disaster, destruction. That is the picture of the Temple we get from the first part of the book of Prophet Ezekiel.

All the punishments announced by the prophets were executed with unexpected intensity. The second part of the book of Ezekiel (34-48) addresses the people in Exile who had lost everything, were broken hearted and lamenting over the disasters. Here we find words of consolation and encouragement, instilling hope with the promise of a bright future. In the place of the unfaithful leaders who brought down total destruction upon Jerusalem and the people, God himself will guide the people like a Good Shepherd. That was the beginning of the message of hope.

“I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses,

and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice” (Ezek 34, 11-16). In the prophecy about the Good Shepherd, one could see a veiled reference to the Messiah: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ezek 34, 23).

All these promises point to the Savior who was to come years later. The most important among them was the promise about the New Temple described in great detail in chapters 40 - 47. It is presented as an eschatological vision. The Glory of God would return to the new Temple. “Then he brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. And there, the Glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his Glory... the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the Glory of the LORD filled the temple. While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me out of the temple. He said to me: Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever. The house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their whoring, and by the corpses of their kings at their death” (Ezek 43, 1-7).

This Temple will be the source of life. “Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side” (Ezek 47,1-2). The water that flows from the temple will reach the Dead Sea and give new life to all the creatures (Eze 47, 1-12). In all the places through which it flows, there will be life in abundance. This river is the symbol of the Spirit of God (Jn 4, 14; 7, 37-39; Rev 22,1-3).

This total renewal will be like a new creation. God said, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Eze 36, 25-28).

Thus they will become the people of God. This will be equivalent to the resurrection of the dead, the prophet tells them through the vision of the valley of dry bones: “Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;

we are clean cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel"(Ez37,11-12). The people of Israel, living in Exile, were like dry bones. The Spirit of God would give them new life, gather them together and lead them back to the Promised Land. It will be like a New Exodus. Ezekiel concludes his message with this hope. This prophetic message, looking beyond the tragic realities of the present, gives a glimpse into the new world God will bring about, and is a source of hope for people of all times, especially today.

5

IN THE EXILE

“O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?... Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. Your foes have roared within your holy place; they set up their emblems there. At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. And then, with hatchets and hammers, they smashed all its carved work. They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling place of your name, bringing it to the ground” (Ps 74, 1-7).

The hardships of life in exile in Babylon were too severe for the people to bear. In B.C. 587 the army of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the Temple. Thousands of people were taken as slaves to Babylon. A cycle of History was completed. God, who freed the slaves from Egypt, accepted them as His own people through the Covenant at Sinai, settled them in the Promised Land, has now

sent them back to slavery, now in Babylon. This awareness of being abandoned by God was a blow too hard for them. They realized that the disaster fell on them because they did not listen to the warnings given through the Prophets and failed to produce the result of true repentance. They wondered what would happen next.

The people were deeply affected by the destruction of the Temple and it was expressed in the above cited Psalm 74. While the Psalms of Zion describe the glory of Jerusalem and the Temple, this Psalm is a Psalm of Lament. The people felt that God rejected them and handed them over to the enemy. The Psalmist does not know if and when they would get some relief from this terrible ordeal. All he could do was lift his heart to God and pray, “Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise your name” (Ps 74, 21).

Psalm 79 also presents the destruction of the Temple as a heart breaking event. “O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?” (Ps 79, 1-5).

Those who broke the Covenant were punished according to the terms of the Covenant. Some thought

God had forsaken them forever. The warning, “Those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts” (Jer 34, 18), had become a reality. The awareness that it was their sins that brought down these disasters came out as songs of Lamentation. The book of Lamentation recounts their sins and weeps over the disaster.

The Book of Lamentations starts with the confession of the sins with the observation: “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal” (Lam 1, 1). The pain becomes deeper with the awareness that it was their sin that invited all these punishments. The main responsibility for such a disaster falls upon the Priests and false Prophets. “Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading” (Lam 2, 14). “The LORD's anointed, the breath of our life, was taken in their pits-- the one of whom we said, “Under his shadow we shall live among the nations” (Lam 4, 20).

The leaders had led them away from the Lord with their false instructions and empty practices. Now the people find themselves sinking in a bottomless pit. Even though they felt desperate, from some distant corner of the collective memory there comes a ray of hope into their gloomy atmosphere: “The thought of

my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion", says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him" (Lam 3, 19-24). Even when there was no reason for hope, this line of thought inspired them to put their trust in the merciful love of God with unfailing fidelity. During this period of deep soul searching, God sent some prophets with the message of consolation and hope so that the people would not drown in despair

Jeremiah had told them about the new Covenant God will make with the people. Ezekiel had dreamt of a new Temple where the Glory of the Lord will come back and settle in the midst of the people. The author of the Book of Lamentations also had shed some rays of hope into the minds of the people in Exile. All these prophets gave the people hope and consolation. But more than all these, it is the prophet known as Deutero Isaiah, the author of Is 40-55, who really consoled and encouraged the people in Exile by painting a beautiful picture of the ever loving and merciful God. In fact the sixteen chapters attribute to him is usually known as The Book of Consolation.

The Prophet explained that the fall of Jerusalem and the exile were not signs of being forsaken by God; this is the punishment for their sins. God has not abandoned them, nor does He want to destroy them. God has allowed all these disaster to happen in order

to purify them. The prophet told the people that God has sent him to: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins” (Is 40, 1-2).

While they were in the Promised Land and especially during the time of the Kings the people had forgotten their mission to the world. God had promised Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12, 3). The promise came with a mission. “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites” (Ex 19, 5-6). The people of Israel were chosen for a purpose and to fulfill that mission they had to live according to the Commandments of the Covenant. But the people instead of strictly obeying the Will of God revealed through the Commandments, concentrated on the Temple and the rituals. Those who were supposed to lead the people in the ways of the Lord went astray. This wandering in the darkness was brought to an end by the Babylonian captivity.

God did not forget or forsake the people of Israel, Deutero Isaiah told them. Just because the Temple was burned down, the presence of God in their midst did not end. God who is beyond space and time was with them in the land of exile. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed

you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Is 43, 1-2).

God revealed Himself to the people in Exile as the God who walks with them, guides their paths, and protects them. He does not need a Temple to reside. God does not ask for sacrifices and offerings but only the fidelity and love of the people, expressed through the observance of His Commandments. The people, purified in the furnace of suffering, must become a light to the world. The prophet explains the message through the image of a servant. “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.... I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Is 42, 1-7). This mission will be fully carried out only in the distant future by the Savior, but the people must not forget that they are called to be the light to the world.

Babylonian exile was a time of purification and of great revelations. Through their suffering their false ideas and the pride that they are the only “holy people” in the world were wiped away. They gained new insights about the purpose of their call to be the “people of God” and about their mission in the midst of the peoples in the world. The feeling that their

God, Yahweh, is more powerful than other gods was corrected; The Lord their God is the only God; He is the God of all the peoples in the world. There is only one God and that is Yahweh, the liberator. He is the God of all. This truth has to be proclaimed to all the nations of the earth. That is the basic purpose of the call of Israel and that is their main duty, to be the light of the world, the prophet told them.

During the Exile they came to the realization that they were called to be the witnesses of God before the people of the world. In order to know God and to make Him known to others, they did not need a Temple or cultic activities but lead a life according to the Commandments of God. Even when there was no king, priests or their own Temple, Israel continued to be the “people of God”. When they lost all that they thought as essential, they came to know their true nature and mission as the people of God. God who was with them in all the places gave them light and hope. God is the Creator of the universe who controls everything and strengthens all gave them hope: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Is 40, 28-31).

The new mission, that was to be the light of the world, was the greatest blessing that they received

through the Exile in Babylon. They were not supposed to keep away from the Gentiles but become a witness to the Lord while being in their midst. They must act like a light in the darkness. Those who were attracted by the superstitions and idolatrous cultic activities of the Gentiles recognized their mistake and were purified through the punishment; they resolved to carry out their responsibilities with fidelity. To help them in their mission, the Lord will be with them all the time.

The people of Israel came to the conviction that God will not forsake them. Their fault was that they put their trust in manmade institutions and cultic practices. “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer” (Is 54, 7-8). “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (Is 54, 10).

Such promises, consolations and directions infused a new spirit and hope into the broken hearts of the people in Exile. They became courageous with the presence of the Lord who walks with them. It inspired them and gave them motivation to return to the Promised Land, like a new Exodus, as a new people. What happened to the people who returned to Jerusalem? How did the new insights about the Temple influence their life after the Exile? These points will be discussed in the next chapter.

6

POST EXILIC PERIOD

“In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up” (2 Chr 36, 22-23).

The promises were fulfilled to a certain extent. King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and became the sole power in the Middle East. He gave freedom to all the peoples whom the King of Babylon had captured and enslaved. They were free to return to their home lands and live according to their faith and traditions. It was the policy of the Persian King that free and happy people were better than slaves who tend to revolt and become violent. That is how the Israelites got the permission to return to their

country. They received not only freedom but also the direction to go back and re-build the Temple. The King had offered the financial help to build the Temple (Ezra 1-2).

Reconstruction of the Temple

In the history of Israel, a new period started in B.C. 537 as the people in Exile returned and began to re-build the Temple that was destroyed. The period between B.C. 537 when they returned to their own Land to A.D. 70 when the Roman army burned down the Temple, is called the post-Exilic period. The various vicissitudes of the Temple during these six centuries are discussed briefly here.

The proclamation of Emperor Cyrus had a decisive influence in the history of Israel and in the construction of the Temple. This episode is repeated in the same words at the end of the book of Chronicles that presents the history of Israel and at the beginning of the book of Ezra who wrote the post exilic history of Israel: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, `The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'"(2Chr 36,22-23; Ezr 1,1-3). Six out of the ten chapters of

the book of Ezra deal with the re-construction of the Temple. This shows the importance the sacred author gives to the Temple.

The preaching of the Prophets, during the Exile, especially that of Deuteron Isaiah, were forgotten during the post exilic period. The people and the leaders concentrated on the construction of the Temple. The main concern of those who came back to Jerusalem was to build the Temple and offer sacrifices to the Lord. The Persian Emperor allowed the people to take back all the vessels, Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from the Temple, a total of 5469 vessels, (Ezra 1, 11). The first thing they did was build an altar. "Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God" (Ezra 3,2). They began to offer sacrifices. "From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid" (Ezra 3, 6). After that, they started the construction of the Temple.

"Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel" (Ezra 3, 9-10). The elderly people who had seen the

old Temple became disappointed and lamented when they saw the foundation of the new Temple because the new Temple was going to be much smaller than the old one. However, the people were happy and cooperated to the best of their abilities. But they could not proceed with the work because of the opposition of the neighboring people.

In BC721 Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, deported the inhabitants to various parts of the vast empire and brought foreigners and settled them in the land of Israel. Gradually these people mingled with those Israelites who were left behind in the land, and there emerged a mixed race of people who were called Samaritans after the name of the destroyed capital Samaria. Now these people demanded that they too should have a part in the construction of the Jerusalem Temple as it was part of their tradition too. But, the leaders of Judah did not want them involved in the construction of the Temple, because they had lost their genetic integrity and purity. There issued a great protest that blocked the temple construction for some time. The Samaritan leaders sent a petition to the Emperor of Persia, accusing Judah of preparing for revolt. Believing them, the Emperor sent an order to stop the construction of the Temple (Ezra 4, 1-24).

It was in B.C. 536. Only after 14 years, in B.C. 522, could they restart the construction work with the permission of the emperor. By then the people had lost their interest in building the Temple. Not only that, they did not experience the joy and prosperity they had dreamt of while returning from Exile. Those

who were deported to Babylon could not get back their property which was in the meantime occupied by others. Continuous drought destroyed the farm crops and caused great famine.

It was in this situation that Prophet Haggai came on the scene with the encouragement to build the Temple. The book of Prophet Haggai has only two chapters and 38 verses and the only thing he emphasized was that the construction of the Temple should be completed soon. The cause of all the suffering of the people was that the construction of the Temple was not completed. The Prophet who started with the question, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1, 4), announced in the name of God, that the cause of all the miseries the people are suffering is that the construction of the Temple is not completed.

"You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes" (Hag 1, 6). What could they do to remedy the situation? The Prophet proclaimed the solution. "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD" (Hag 1, 7-8). He encouraged the people and assured them that the Lord is with them. Though the Temple did not have the beauty and splendor of the one built by Solomon, the Lord was pleased by it. "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the

LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2, 9). That was consoling for the people.

Finally the construction of the Temple was completed in B.C. 515. “They finished their building by the command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (Ezra 6,14-15). Thus, one of their great dreams was fulfilled. After the consecration of the Temple, festivals were celebrated and sacrifices offered regularly. The Priests and the Levites did their duties with fidelity. Under the leadership of Ezra the religious practices were done with great accuracy. Bible Scholars are of the opinion that the first ten chapters in the book of Leviticus were given the present form under the leadership of Ezra.

Hopes not fulfilled

Though the Temple was built and the people offered sacrifices and celebrated festivals to the best of their ability, the prosperity promised by Haggai did not become a reality. The complaints the people presented before Nehemiah the ruler, show that just the opposite happened. In B.C. 445, the Emperor of Persia appointed Nehemiah, the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, as one responsible for organizing the activities in Jerusalem.

“There was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we

are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive”. There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine”. And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others” (Neh 5,1-5). Why did this happen? What happened to the promises given by those who encouraged the construction of the Temple? That is what the Lord taught through prophet generally known as Trito Isaiah (Is 56-66).

Trito Isaiah – The Temple and Justice

The prophet whom bible scholars prefer to call Trito-Isaiah addressed this problem. He told the people that God did not take back the promises He had made; He was faithful to His promises. The Prophet repeated again and again that the reason why the promises of prosperity in the land are not fulfilled is the infidelity of the people. Prophet called for a deeper conversion and renewal of life. It is generally agreed that Trito-Isaiah preached after the time of Haggai, and before the religious renewal under Ezra, i.e. at the end of the 6th century or the beginning of 5th century. His preaching was mainly a call to conversion mixed with promises.

The prophecies that started with the introduction, “Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do

what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed” (Is 56, 1), gave great importance to the Temple. Those who remain faithful to the Lord and live according to His Commandments, no matter who it is, Gentiles as well as the Israelites, will receive the blessings of God. “I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Is 56, 5). “The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56, 6-7).

This promise is repeated many times but the life of the people did not improve as expected mainly because the leaders failed to give them proper guidance. “His watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. (Is 56, 10-11).

Jerusalem Temple is the “House of God” for all the people in the world. There, all must be free to come and experience the presence of God. According to the view of Trito-Isaiah this was the plan of God not yet fulfilled, but had to be fulfilled. During the

cleansing of the Temple, Jesus quoted this prophecy, combining it with Jer 7,11 . “Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk 11, 17). The center of Pilgrimage for all the people was turned into a cultic center of sacrifices and pious celebrations for the Jews alone. The priests did not care about teaching the people the laws of God and the people did not care to obey them. Hence there was no relationship between cult and daily life. They gave great importance to cultic rituals thinking that they could please God by these formal practices. At the same time violence and injustice increased in the society. People lamented saying God does not listen to their prayers and does not give them blessings; they even began to question the value of all those religious exercises. That is when God interfered through the prophet Trito Isaiah.

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins” (Is 58, 1). Through the prophet God asked the people who complained that God does not hear their prayers, about the meaning their activities. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this

the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Is 58, 3-6).

Unless the religious practices pave the way for a renewal of personal life and support a life according to the Commandments of God, they have no meaning in the eyes of God. The prophet made it very clear. Forgetting all the lessons they learned while in exile, the people again became slaves of empty rituals. What does God require of the leaders who mislead the people? The Prophet continued to present the answer in clear, strong language.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Is 58, 6-7).

Restore justice, give freedom to all; ensure the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter for all through sharing - these are the demands God placed before the leaders. On the other hand, after appropriating what belong to others, lamenting that God is not acting justly would produce no result. Going one step further, the Prophet pointed out that executing justice is the true worship that God demands. Here, we could see a hint at what Jesus spoke as the criterion for the final Judgment (Mt 25, 31-46).

God will be pleased with the Temple, sacrifices and religious practices only if they would help build

up a society based on justice. The response God gives through the Prophet to the people who lament that God does not hear their prayers points in this direction. “See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” (Is 59, 1-2).

The accusations the Prophet made were directed at all the people that included the leaders, rulers and the rich people. Prophet Third Isaiah saw them all together as one person, as a corporate personality. The action of one individual, good and bad, would affect the whole society. From this point of view, all were responsible for the miseries the people suffered. To make the prayers and cultic activities acceptable to God, there should be justice at all levels of the society. The Prophet continued to say that it was the only thing lacking for which he cited many examples.

“For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity.... Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace” (Is 59, 3-8). The people joined the lamentation and cried out: “For our transgressions

before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart” (Is 59,12-13).

In this helplessness God will intervene again and will ensure true freedom for the people. God will send a Prophet to break all the bondages, to stop slavery and to re-establish justice. “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Is 61, 1-2). Jesus presented this prophecy as his mission while he was in the Synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4, 18-21).

After listing the evils of the people and leaders, God promised through the Prophet a future filled with peace and joy. It will be like a “New Heaven and New Earth” (Is 65, 17-25). There will be no corruption. All the creatures would live in peace. Then God will not need a Temple to reside. God who is present everywhere will be available for all at all times and at all places.

“Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?” (Is 66, 1) What is needed is not a Temple or sacrifices but the fear of the Lord, faith, obedience and a life of justice. “All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD. But

this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word. Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; whoever sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever presents a grain offering, like one who offers swine's blood; whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and in their abominations they take delight" (Is 66, 2-3).

This is a call and a challenge to worship God by making justice available for all. In fact this is not a new definition of worship; it was already revealed in the Exodus event. "I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me"; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son.'" (Ex 4,23). God knew that people, due to their fallen nature and innate weakness, will not be able to fulfill this command and direction by themselves. Therefore He will act again, make a New Covenant, promised through by Jeremiah (31,31-37) and Ezekiel (36,25-27), that would enable the people to live in accordance with the expressed Will of God, now written not on tablets of stone but upon their hearts. Then Jerusalem will become the center where people will experience the presence of God (Is 66, 7-24).

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Is 66, 13). This will be a new creation, something that will happen at the end of time. "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD; so shall your descendants and your name remain" (Is 66, 22). Tritio-Isaiah

concluded his message presenting a beautiful eschatological picture for the people of God. But the realities the people experienced and the attitude of the leaders and the rituals they executed were totally different.

Religious Renewal based on rituals

The voice of Trito Isaiah who called for a life of faith based on justice fell on deaf ears. Ezra and co-workers who took over the leadership of the people, concentrated on keeping the purity of their faith. In doing so they gave emphasis for two things: 1. Avoid contact with the Gentiles and 2. Have active participation in the rituals in the Temple.

Purity of Faith

The people of Israel were proud of the fact that God had chosen them, liberated them from slavery and through a Covenant made them His own people: "...and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19,6). They believed that all the disasters fell on them because they engaged in idol worship. That happened because of their contact with the Gentiles. God had ordered the first generation of people who occupied the Promised Land to eliminate all the Gentiles from there. But instead, following the example of the Canaanites, they engaged in idol worship and followed other forbidden cultic practices. Hence Ezra together with the other leaders were resolved not to let it happen again. For that, the first thing they had to do was cut off all the relationships with the Gentiles.

During the exile many Israelite men had married gentile women. These marriages were officially nullified and the men who had married gentiles were forced to send them away “Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath” (Ezra 10,3-5). The leaders did not care what happened to the rejected wives and children. They nurtured a ghetto mentality with a feeling of superiority that they were the only holy people and all the others were sinners. The People who were called to be a light of the world, forgetting their mission, tried to withdraw into themselves in an attempt to preserve the purity of their faith.

Ritualistic Religiosity

God dwells in the Temple and so sacrifices should be offered regularly according the liturgical prescriptions. The people should come to Jerusalem as pilgrims. Special laws and regulations were made and put into practice for all the rituals. The Priests and the Levites gave leadership for all the religious activities. There were strict laws regarding all the areas of faith and life, such as observance of Sabbath, sacrifices, laws concerning ritual purity, etc. They ignored the teaching of the Prophets that the heart of the law is love and God desires mercy not sacrifice (Hos 6, 6).

Great attention was given to organizing and executing the religious laws. Ezra was a scribe and his followers became a special group called the Scribes or Lawyers. They believed and taught that divine revelation ended with Ezra and there would be no more new prophets. They collected, edited and published all the traditions of the people and teachings of the Prophets both written and oral. Here we have the final version of the two parts of the Bible, namely the Torah and the Prophets. They tried to execute the law meticulously. The leaders took it as their responsibility. The Scribes tried to envisage all possible situations and cases where the Laws had to be applied.

There was a very influential group among the Levitical priests called the Sadducees. The name derives from Zadok, who was the High Priest during the time of David and Solomon. They took up the responsibility of keeping the Temple, and all the rituals related to Sacrifices and prayers. A Temple centered religiosity developed.

One People, one Temple and all the sacrifices should be offered only in that Temple – that was the order of the time. During and after the exile, many prayer centers were formed in the land. These centers were called Synagogues as it was a place for the people to come together. In fact the word synagogue derives from the Greek verb “sun-agein”, meaning to come together. On Sabbaths there were readings of the Word of God and other prayer services in the synagogues. However, celebrations of main feasts and all sacrifices were made only in Jerusalem Temple. Great importance was given to Pilgrimages and new

Psalms were composed describing the greatness and the glory of Jerusalem, the City of the Lord.

Absence of Prophets

After King Zedekiah was sent into Exile in Babylon in B.C. 587 there were no more kings in Israel. After that Israel had no political independence either. First they came under the dominion of Babylon (B.C.587-538): then under Persia (B.C 538 to 332); then came the Greek domination (B.C. 332 to 63) and finally under Roman rule (B.C. 63 to A.D. 70). With the Maccabean revolt (B.C.167-164) there were some changes, but the people of Israel never got back their full freedom and kingly rule.

Another important feature of this period was that there were no prophets. Historically, Malachi was the last Prophet. After the Temple was rebuilt (B.C.515), and before Nehemiah became the ruler (B.C.444), Malachi preached in Israel. He gave importance to the preservation of the Temple and lawful sacrifices. Prophet Malachi gave strong warnings to the Priests who made sacrifices without respecting the laws of ritual purity: “I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence” (Mal 2, 3).

Malachi saw that the carelessness of the Priests and their unholy sacrifices were leading the people astray. “Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from

your hands” (Mal 1,10). We can hear an echo of the voice of God shouted through Prophet Amos, “Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people” (Amos 9, 1). It did not mean that the Prophet did not want the Temple or announced that the Sacrifices were meaningless. The infidelity of the people and the Priests had made them irrelevant. That is what Prophet Malachi was saying.

Malachi foresaw new, meaningful and universal offerings in the place of these corrupt and unacceptable sacrifices. Then, even the Temple will be forgotten. “From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 1,11). To fulfill this prophecy, the Son of God had to become man and sacrifice Himself on the Cross.

Malachi reminded the priests that it was their responsibility to teach the laws of God to the people and make them walk in the path of justice. “The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts” (Mal 2, 7). But the priests did just the opposite as they broke the laws, forgot them and misled the people (Mal 2, 8-16). These accusations mainly pointed out the failures of the leaders in liturgical and cultic matters, rather than in the practice of justice.

Nevertheless, in the words of Malachi we can occasionally hear a call to put an end to the injustice in the society. The Prophet warned that if they

continued to violate the precepts of the Covenant God will punish them (Mal 3, 2-5). Before the Last Judgment, God will send the Prophet Elijah to prepare the people and he will reconcile them with God and with each other (Mal 3, 1; 4, 1-6). Malachi has given a very creative and essential direction that deserves special attention. He warned the people against stealing from the offering made to the Lord and he also explained the purpose of the offering. "Will anyone rob God? ... Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ..." (Mal 3, 8-10). In comparison to other prophets, these warnings and directions were rather weak, but after the time of Malachi there was no prophetic voice at all.

When the entire life of the people came under the control of the Priests, there was no place for Prophets. The foreign rulers did not interfere in the daily life of the people as they wanted only the taxes and for that there should be peace in the land. No one should object their orders; no one should disturb the peace and order in the society that might lead to rebellion and non-payment of tributes and taxes. All other matters were under the control of the Priests. In this situation no one was allowed to come on the scene as a prophet.

A directive given in the Book of Zechariah is very revealing in this context: "And if any one again appears as a prophet, his father and mother who bore him will say to him, 'You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the LORD'; and his father and

mother who bore him shall pierce him through when he prophesies". (Zech 13,3). Though such behavior was directed against false prophets, no attempt was made to discern if one was a false prophet or if he came from the Lord. All were stamped as false prophets. After Malachi, no one was accepted as a prophet in his own name.

This narrow mentality, though enforced with religious authority, met with some protests as well. The book of Jonah is a telling example of such a reaction. Jonah is presented as a Prophet who preached in Nineveh, the Capital of Assyria, but in fact it is a strong protest against the ghetto mentality and erroneous religiosity enforced by the priestly rule. The prophets are considered as holy in Israel but here is one who runs away against the command of Yahweh. He had to be forced, first by throwing him into the sea from the ship and then being swallowed by a huge fish, and finally on the third day brought to the shore of Nineveh, to make him preach to the people of that great city of pagans. In contrast to this, hearing just a few words from the Prophet, the people of Nineveh repented. According the decree of the king, they all, including the king, covered with sackcloth, fasted and cried out for the mercy of God. The book of Jonah is a satire and protest against the ghetto mentality of the Israelites

Persecution - Renewal

During the time of the Persian rule, the people of Israel had religious freedom and the political authorities did not oppose the people living according

to their faith and religious traditions. When Alexander the Great captured Palestine, in B.C.332, they came under Greek rule. When Alexander died, the empire was divided between the four commanders in chief of the army. Israel became part of Egypt under Ptolemy. During this Ptolemaic rule also they had religious freedom. Many people of Israel, especially young men, attracted by Greek culture, accepted their mentality and adopted many of their practices; but it was a voluntary act; nobody forced it upon them.

In B.C. 200, Israel became part of Syria under the Seleucid dynasty. In the beginning they did not interfere with the religious affairs of Israel. But, Antiochus IV who became king in B.C. 175, and took for himself the title Epiphanes, meaning God Manifest, decided to force all to accept Greek culture and proclaimed it as a national policy. As part of this Hellenization, the statue of Zeus was placed in Jerusalem Temple. The people of Israel were forbidden to practice their religious activities. Observation of Sabbath and Circumcision for the children was banned. Those who opposed were brutally treated and put to death. Thus for the first time in their entire history the people of Israel faced religious persecution. It started in B.C. 167.

The People faced a serious problem. Those who appreciated and supported the Greek culture, obeyed the king, and in turn received approval and royal privileges. A group of people decided that they would observe the laws of the Lord even if they were to die for it. As a group totally consecrated to God, they called themselves "Chazidim", meaning the holy one. Since they were marked by dress and life style, the people

called them “Perushim” which mean “set apart”. The word “Pharisee” is derived from this term.

Mathathias, a priest, resolved to resist the forced Hellenization. He was asked by the royal servant to sacrifice a pig before the statue of Antiochus Epiphanes. He not only refused but even killed the Jew who came forward to perform the sacrifice and also the royal servant. That marked the Maccabean revolt. Mathathias withdrew into the forest with his five sons and prepared for guerrilla warfare. When he died, his son Judas took over the leadership and the people called him “Maccabeus” which means hammer. They saw Judas and his brothers as the hammer that would crush the head of the Syrian king. After three and a half years of fight, the Maccabees defeated the Syrian army. The history of these revolts and battles are reported in detail in the two books under that name, Maccabees.

“Then Judas and his brothers said, “See, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it”. So all the army assembled and went up to Mount Zion” (1 Mac 4, 36-37). The Temple was purified and re-consecrated. To commemorate this, they declared that day as a holiday. “Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev” (1 Mac 4,59). With that Israel got another important holyday to celebrate, the day of Dedication. The importance of the Temple and Altar increased.

The evangelist John has recorded that Jesus revealed Himself during the festival of Dedication (Jn 10, 22-30).

The Hasmonean Rule

The Maccabean revolt gave partial freedom to the Israelites. First Judas and after his death Jonathan his brother provided the leadership. When he died the eldest brother, Simon became the leader. People anointed him first as High Priest and then as King. Thus, the Priesthood and Kingship were united in one person.

“The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise, and that he should be governor over them and that he should take charge of the sanctuary and appoint officials over its tasks and over the country and the weapons and the strongholds, and that he should take charge of the sanctuary, and that he should be obeyed by all, and that all contracts in the country should be written in his name, and that he should be clothed in purple and wear gold” (1 Mc 14, 41-43). There were no Prophets on the scene. The kingship that started with Simon continued through his son, John Hyrcanus. Thus, there emerged a royal dynasty different from that of David. This dynasty was known as Hasmonean dynasty after the name of Hasmoneus the Father of Mathathias

Some of the priests protested that a soldier who shed blood in war has become High Priest and offered sacrifices. They lined up behind a person they called “Teacher of Righteousness” and withdrew into the

desert. A religious community was formed in Qumran, on the North Western banks of the Dead Sea. They were known as “Anawim of Yahweh” meaning “The Poor Of Yahweh”, Essen monks or Qumran community. They believed that in the place of the religious institution that was corrupted by the Maccabean-Hasmonean leaders, the Messiah would come and set up a new religious institution. In fact they thought about two Messiahs, one royal and another priestly. Being convinced that it was their responsibility to prepare the way for that Messiah, they spent their time in studying the Word of God and strict obedience of the laws and prayer and fasting. It is believed that John the Baptist spent his early years with these monks. The statement in the Gospel, “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (Lk 1, 80), has been taken as an indication to this.

The Roman Period

In B.C. 63, the Roman General, Pompey the Great captured Palestine and made it part of the Roman province of Syria. With that, the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty came to an end. Priesthood and Kingship was separated again and bestowed on two different persons. The Romans allowed John Hyrcanus to continue as the High Priest. The political rule of Palestine was entrusted to Antipater an Idumean. In B.C.47, Fasael the elder son of Antipater became the Governor of Jerusalem while his younger son, Herod became the Governor of Galilee. Peace continued for some years.

In B.C. 44, Julius Caesar was assassinated by the Roman Senators and a civil war broke out. In this situation Rome could not concentrate on the administration of the Empire. Taking advantage of this situation, Parthians attacked Syria from the East; Rome could not resist them. As the Syrians became rulers, they made Antigonus, the second brother of Hyrchanus, the High Priest in Jerusalem.

Herod the Great and temple reconstruction

As soon as he got the power, Antigonus murdered Fasael, Son of Antipater, and the Governor of Jerusalem. Antipater was killed in a plot three years ago. Both ears of Hyrchanus were cut off, making him unfit for the position of High Priest and was exiled to Babylon. Herod, realizing the danger, escaped to Rome and the Roman Senate proclaimed him the king of Palestine. A king without a kingdom! After returning to Galilee, with the help of the Roman army, he captured Palestine and started his rule in Jerusalem that lasted for 33 years.

While going through the history of the Temple the next important event is the rebuilding and expansion of the Temple started by King Herod the Great in B.C.19. Even during the time of Jesus the re-construction works had not been completed. Because his Father was an Idumean, though his mother was a Jew, the Jews considered Herod as half Jew or gentile. To please everybody, Herod began the renovation and expansion of Jerusalem Temple. He managed the construction works without demolishing the existing Temple and having no break in the sacrifices offered, even for one day.

The top of Mount Zion was flattened and prepared a ground of 42 Acres. Herod built a magnificent Temple, that was one of the wonders of the world. (for a description of the Temple, see pp. 132-135) There I was Rabbinic saying: “if you have not seen the Temple of Jerusalem you have not seen the best temple”. The construction works that started in B.C. 19 were fully completed only in A.D. 64. Six years later, in A.D. 70, the Roman army under the leadership of Titus, burned down the Temple; thus, ended the history of Jerusalem Temple.

In A.D. 132 there was another revolt against the Roman rule under the leadership of Simon Bar Kokhba, who was acclaimed as the Messiah. They succeeded in establishing an independent state of Israel over parts of Judea for about two years. But Rome struck back with full force, with an army made up of six full legions with auxiliaries and elements from up to six additional legions and finally crushed it and the revolutionaries taken prisoners and auctioned out in various market places of the Roman Empire. At the place where the Temple stood, the Romans built a temple in honor of Jupiter and the Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem. With this, we come to the end of the chronicle of the Temple of Jerusalem that started during the time of King David. But, before that there took place an event, The Christ Event, that divided the history of the world into two, A.D. and B.C. and changed the meaning and relevance of the Temple. The study of the “House of God” continues with this great event.

7

JESUS AND THE HOUSE OF GOD

Jesus told the people who conducted business in the Temple compound, “Stop making my Father's house a market place!” (Jn 2, 16).

In the search for the meaning and relevance of the “House of God”, the relationship between Jesus and the Temple is a decisive point. What was Jesus’ approach to the Jerusalem Temple which the people of Israel considered as the most holy place and the “House of God”? What meaning did Jesus give to the Temple? Here an attempt is made to study the attitude of Jesus expressed through His teachings and actions, as reported in the four Gospels, in dealing with the Temple

The Temple appears in the Gospel of Luke more than in the other gospels. Luke starts the gospel narrative with the picture of Zachariah the priest offering incense in the Temple and the people praying outside (Lk 1, 8-22). The end of the Gospel also is in the Temple. After the Ascension, the disciples returned from Bethany “And they worshiped him,

and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the Temple blessing God” (Lk 24, 52-53). Thus the Gospel narrative begins and ends in the Temple. This is a pointer to the importance the Evangelist Luke gives to the Temple.

This fact reveals not only the special interest of the Evangelist but also shows the attitude Jesus had towards the Temple. The parents of Jesus were pious Jews who observed all the commandments of God and laws and traditions of the people. On the 40th day of His birth, Baby Jesus was presented in the Temple (Lk 2, 22-24). Since they were poor, making use of the provision in the law, they offered two turtle doves to redeem the baby (Lev 12,2-8). This was His first entry into the Temple.

Jesus was in the Temple again at the age of 12 (Lk 2, 41-52). The parents of Jesus used to go to Jerusalem for all the important festivals. Even if they did not go for all the feasts, they did go for the Passover with Jesus. The Evangelist does not explain why Jesus remained in the Temple when His parents returned home. After a day’s journey, the parents noticed that the boy was not with them. In tears they searched for him and “after three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Lk 2, 46). Those who listened to him were surprised at the knowledge and intelligence of the boy. The response Jesus gave to his Mother’s question was even more surprising and intriguing: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Lk 2, 49).

The words of Jesus “In my Father’s house” contained an implicit reminder and correction to the

words his mother: “your father and I have been...” He was reminding her and the readers that was not Joseph but God the Father is his real Father. However, the main subject was the awareness of Jesus that he should be giving all his attention to the fulfillment of the mission God has entrusted to him. Hence, he stayed back in the Temple to be involved in the work of His Father. What he did there was listening to the teachers, seeking explanations and also supplementing their knowledge. In a way he was teaching them.

All the three Synoptic Gospels have recorded the episode of Jesus going to the Temple for the feast of Passover. It was during the last week of his public life. The Gospel of John on the other hand has recorded that Jesus went to Jerusalem and entered the Temple many times during his public ministry; in the beginning of his public life (Jn 2, 13-25) and also at the end of his public ministry (Jn 12, 19). Both of these visits were during the Feast of the Passover. John has also recorded that Jesus came to Jerusalem for a feast which is not identified (Jn5,1), feast of Tabernacles (Jn7, 2-10), and the feast of the Dedication (Jn10,22).

The Gospels give the impression that Jesus came to the Temple not to offer sacrifice or to pray but to teach. To pray he went into the wilderness, mountains or solitary places. When he taught about praying, he said to go into one’s room, close the door and pray to the Father who is in secret (Mt 6, 8). It did not mean that one must not go and pray in the Synagogue or Temple. On the other hand, prayer must not be something you do to impress others. It should be a dialogue with the Father who is in our hearts.

House of my Father – House of Prayer

“Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk 11, 17).

Of all the teachings and activities of Jesus in connection with the Temple, the most important one is the “Cleansing of the Temple”. All four Gospels have recorded this episode but there is a difference among them as to when it happened. According to the Synoptic Gospels it happened towards the end of Jesus’ public ministry, during the last week of his life, right after His royal entry into Jerusalem. But, John has placed this event at the beginning of His public ministry. Though there is dispute about the historical accuracy of the event, the common opinion is that Synoptic Gospels are, in this case, historically more accurate than John. The important and relevant fact is not when it happened but what it meant and what was Jesus teaching by this provocative action.

In order to understand the meaning and nuances of an incident, attention should be given to the context of the event, the way it is presented, the situation and the words used. There are some noteworthy differences even among the presentations of the Synoptic Gospels. All the three agree that the event of cleansing the Temple took place soon after Jesus made the royal entry into Jerusalem and his dealings in the Temple paved the way for the conflict with the Jewish leadership. Thus the proclamation of the Gospel in Jerusalem became a severe confrontation. It turned out to be the last event that led to His Crucifixion.

Mathew and Mark have related the cleansing of the Temple to the cursing of the fig tree. In Mathew Jesus cursed the fig tree because there was no fruit and the tree withered immediately and both incidents are presented as a single event (Mt 21, 18-22). This happened the day after the cleansing of the Temple.

Mark has split this event into two incidents. On the way to the Temple, Jesus felt hungry and he went to the Fig Tree and hoped to get something but it had only leaves. Then He pronounced the curse, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (Mk 11, 14). The cleansing of the Temple is reported after this. It was on the next day that they found the fig tree had withered. By splitting the event into two and placing the cleansing of the Temple in the middle, Mark has created a strong connection between the fate of the tree and the temple cleansing. This literary technique is called sandwich narrative. As in a sandwich what is in the center is more important, so also in this narrative. Both events interpret each other, or rather the cursing and the withering of the fig tree points to what is going to happen to the Temple. The Temple, like the fig tree that did not produce fruit, would meet with the same fate. Luke does not record the cursing of the fig tree; instead he reports the parable of a barren fig tree (Lk 13, 6-9). The owner of the tree has given one more year for the tree to produce fruit and if it still remained barren, it would be cut off

Though there are some differences in the way the event is presented, all the three Synoptic Gospels address the same issue. The tree that did not produce fruit symbolizes Jerusalem Temple. When the tree looks healthy with leaves, one could expect fruits. But

when coming closer one sees that there is nothing but leaves. This turned out to be a symbol of hypocrisy. Outside, it looks great but inside it is empty. Wearing the mask of holiness the Temple looks great from the outside but what happens there, were exploitation of the poor and corruption and thus the Temple is like the fig tree that looks flourishing outside but produces no fruit.

Going one step further, the Temple itself is a symbol. It is a place for all the people to come to pray and to experience the presence of God. It is a symbol of the relationship between the people of Israel and God. Here we see the mask of holiness. Hence what will happen to the Temple will be a pointer to what will happen to the people of Israel. Withered fig tree, fallen Temple and a people, who were going to lose the special status of the People of God, need to be seen together. Next, we turn to the cleansing of the Temple.

Cleansing of the Temple

All the four Gospels agree that it happened during the time of Passover. In Luke we find the shortest description of the event, "Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there" (Lk 19, 45). Mathew and Mark mention the money changers and those who sold the doves. John describes the event in greater detail. "In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the

doves: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (Jn 2, 14-16).

In order to understand this event we should have an idea about the structure of the Temple during the time of Jesus. Herod renovated Temple and expanded it on to top of Mount Zion. He flattened the ground to have a building complex that filled 42 Acres of land.

The most important part of the Temple was the "Holy of Holies". In the Temple that Solomon built, the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the innermost room called the most holy place. But when the Babylonian army burned down the Temple, the Ark was lost. Hence in the second temple the Holy of Holies remained empty. However it was separated with a thick curtain. Once a year, the High Priest would enter there to offer the sacrifice of blood. It was this curtain that was torn at the moment Jesus died (Mt 27, 51).

Right in front of the "Holy of Holies" was the "holy place" where only the priests were allowed to enter. It was here the table of Showbread, on which 12 loaves of bread representing the 12 tribes of Israel, was kept. Besides the Table there was the menorah, the lampstand that had seven branches representing the people of Israel. The Altar of Incense was also in this area. In front of this Holy place there was curtain that separated it from the rest of the Temple.

In front of the Holy place, outside the curtain was the altar where they made sacrifices in the morning and evening. Next to it was a rather large hall that was known as the Court of Israel where only the men of Israel above the age of 12 were allowed to enter to pray. Fifteen steps below was the court of women

and that also was a large hall, where 13 big collection boxes were kept. These boxes had wide bottom while the top was narrow, like the shape of a trumpet. All men and women of Israel could enter this area, but boys below 12 and women were not allowed to go beyond. The Gospels have recorded that Jesus once sat there and taught (Mk 12, 41-44; Lk 21, 1-4).

Fifteen steps below the women's court was the large area called "The Court of Gentiles", from which there was access to the women's court on three sides. This area had covered porticoes, and colonnades. Anybody could come here, irrespective of religion, caste or ritual purity. It was in this area The Rabbis used to teach the disciples and also engage in discussion and disputes. When it is said that Jesus taught in the Temple, this area was envisaged. A Part of the court of gentiles was turned into a market place, Called Anna's market.

Market Place or Den of Thieves

Jesus saw the Temple being turned into a market place. All could enter the court of the Gentiles. On the occasion of important feasts, over a million people would come to Jerusalem as pilgrims. Almost all those who come would offer sacrifices and for which they needed animals that are ritually pure. As for cash offering, people could put the coins in one of the 13 collection boxes kept in the Court of Women, with one condition- the coins should not carry any image, because that was considered against the first commandment, idolatry. But the people came from various foreign lands had the coins with the images of the kings of the land.

Outside the Temple there were animal markets from where people could buy the animals for sacrifice, but very often those animals were rejected by the inspecting Levites because they were considered impure or with a blemish and hence not fit for sacrifice. In order to make it easier for the people, pure animals were made available in the Temple compound. An area of the court of the gentiles was set aside for this purpose. It was called Anna's market probably because Annas was the High Priest, who started this innovation. If the animal was bought from this market, no further examination was needed. There was only one problem: animals inside were much more expensive than the animals one could buy outside. A similar thing happened in the matter of money exchange also. There were facilities to exchange the money outside the Temple. But to make it easy for the pilgrims, they organized to have exchange counters inside the Temple but for that the pilgrims had to pay a much higher rate than outside.

It would seem that these two things provoked Jesus into action. The court of the Temple, which should have been a place open to all people for prayer, had become a noisy market place with the bargaining of the merchants and the bleating of the animals. Those who came to pray could not do so in peace. This is the explanation John has given: "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (Jn 2,16). Jerusalem Temple was the house of God the Father. This business and shouting were not fitting to the holiness of the "House of God".

The Synoptic Gospels present the event in a slightly different way. The Situation is the same but

there is a little difference in the explanation Jesus gave, quoting two passages from the Old Testament to explain his action. The first one is a quotation from the book of Prophet Isaiah, "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56, 7). This is a prophecy pointing to universal salvation and the conversion of the people from all over the world. The Court of the Gentiles, now invaded by the animal merchants and money changers, would be pointing to this prophecy- all the nations coming to the House of God. When they were writing the Gospel, Jerusalem Temple had been demolished and that is why Mathew and Luke have avoided the phrase, "all the peoples of the world". Temple should be a "house of prayer", that is the main message of the first part.

The second part of Jesus' accusation "You have made it a den of robbers" is taken from the book of Prophet Jeremiah. After listing the various sins in the society, the Prophet asked: "And then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"-- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD" (Jer 7, 10-11). Jesus noticed two major offences in the Temple. First they had turned the House of prayer into a market place, violating the sacredness of the House of God and making it impossible to pray in peace and quiet. Second, this business itself was corrupt. In the Name of God they were exploiting the devotees, extorting money from them in the name of the laws of purity. This Jesus saw as nothing less than robbery. The head of the robbers was the High Priest as the proceedings went into his account. In the eyes of

Jewish leadership, the deeds and words of Jesus were provocative and criminal. But it seems there is something more in what Jesus did and said, as we can see from the account of Mark.

In the Gospel of Mark there is another small detail: “And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple” (Mk 11, 16). No other gospel has given this detail. Now the question: What was it they were carrying through the Temple that Jesus saw offensive? Bible Scholars see several possibilities. Some think that it refers to the vessels used for sacrifices. Some others see this statement as referring to making the Temple compound as a public road for they carry everything. In either case it was not proper for the prayerful atmosphere of the Temple.

The Greek word that is translated by some versions as things and by others as vessels is “Skeuos”. The literal meaning of this word is instrument. It could be any kind of instruments. Some scholars argue that it could refer to weapons such as sword, spear, and knife. In this context another Greek word, *lestes* also would give some insight. This word is usually translated as robbers. True, the word has this meaning, and it is so translated in the gospels when speaking about the two criminals crucified with Jesus, on either side. However, it is important to note that they were not ordinary thieves. Jesus condemned as a revolutionary, who instigated the people to revolt against the Roman rule and was crucified as the “King of the Jews”. Hence it is logical to conclude those crucified with him on either side should also have been convicted of a similar crime

It is also remarkable that when Pilate asked the people to choose the one they wanted to be set free, the one who was placed beside Jesus was Barabbas a guerilla leader who was imprisoned for instigating revolt and committing murder. "This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder" (Lk 23, 19). Hence behind the word "thieves" there stand freedom fighters or members of the Zealot movement who wanted to take up arms against Rome and drive them out of the country

From this point of view, it could be inferred that the accusation Jesus raised against the leaders implies much more than exploiting the people and making unjust gain from the business in the Temple compound, and carrying some vessels or things through compound. It could mean that they had made the Temple ground the gathering place of terrorists. It is also striking that when Titus led the war against Jerusalem, the last part of the battle was fought in the Temple. That is why, even though the Romans wanted to spare the Temple, finally they had to set fire to it because the freedom fighters had made the Temple their last place of resistance. Hence it is quite probable that Jesus was accusing the leaders of Judaism that they had turned the Temple not only into a market place but also made it the center of revolutionaries.

The Synoptic Gospels report that after the cleansing Jesus taught in the Temple and continued to proclaim the Gospel. But, His proclamation and teaching turned into to severe conflict with the

Jewish leadership. Five such conflicts are reported in the Synoptic Gospels. The conflict started with the Jewish leaders questioning the authority of Jesus.

“When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Mt 21, 23). It is clear that they were questioning him about his authority in the matter of chasing the merchants out of the Temple and then teaching in the Temple. Instead of giving a direct answer, Jesus put a counter question to them, about John the Baptist. “Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know”. And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (Mt 21, 24-27). All had believed that John the Baptist came from God and it was he who had introduced Jesus to the people as the One come from God (Jn 1,29.35; 3,27-036). So, those who approved of John must approve of Jesus also.

In the Gospel of John, the circumstances of the questioning and the response of Jesus are quite different and it gives new insights about the Temple. When Jesus drove out the merchants, the authority questioned Jesus. They asked, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” (Jn 2, 18). They wanted a sign to prove that it was God who sent him. Then Jesus promised a sign:

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2, 19). Then the Jews asked him, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” (Jn 2, 20).

Here two different Greek words are translated as “Temple”. The first one is “hieron” which refers to the entire Temple complex including the court of the gentiles. This is the word used when the merchants were driven out. But to the question of the leaders Jesus responded with another word “naos”, which indicates the “Holy of Holies” and the holy place where only the priests could enter.

They did not understand the nuance in the words of Jesus. They thought Jesus was talking about all the building Herod built. 46 years in their counter question gives emphasis to the length of time required to finish those buildings. It took another 35 years to complete all the construction. The renovation and expansion works were completed in A.D. 64 and in A.D. 70 the building complex was burned down by the Romans.

At the time even His disciples did not understand that Jesus was talking about his body as the Temple. They realized it only after the resurrection of Jesus (Jn 2, 21-22). The Jewish leaders took His words in the literal sense and later it was used to accuse and to insult Jesus (Mt 26, 61; 27, 40). The resurrection of Jesus proved that the authority of Jesus came from God. But the Jewish leadership was not ready to accept it. They bribed the guards to lie about the resurrection of Jesus (Mt 28, 11 – 15) and thus they closed their hearts against the Truth.

Prophecy about the Destruction of the Temple

The last teaching of Jesus about the Jerusalem Temple is a prophecy. The Evangelist Luke has recorded that when Jesus made the solemn entry into the city and the Temple. "And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation (Lk 19, 41-44). Total destruction of Jerusalem would be the end of the Temple also. This would happen because they wasted all the opportunities given them for repentance. The ruins of the Temple would be a lasting monument to their failures and infidelity.

After the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus taught there in public. He called the people to conversion warning them about the impending punishment and total destruction. However, they refused to listen to His words. Instead of repenting they plotted to kill him. After severely criticizing the Jewish leadership and warning them about the punishment, Jesus came out of the Temple compound. No more will Jesus enter the Temple. As He was coming out, one of the disciples said to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus told him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Mk 13, 1-2).

It was a prophecy that was fulfilled Forty years later. The place that has become a market place where people bargained, carried out dishonest business and had become a den of terrorists could not be called a Temple anymore. It would not receive the protection from God. The Temple lost its relevance because of the evil activities, injustice, exploitation and violence that took place there.

The Temple had become like an idol that imparted wrong message and a false sense of security to the people. Jesus had the prophetic vision about the destruction of the Temple as Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel had years earlier. Even the last call for conversion fell on deaf ears. The one year allowed for the Fig tree to produce fruit has ended. The only thing left to do was to cut it down and burn it. What is told about the Fig tree will become a reality for the Temple of Jerusalem. That is why Jesus shed tears while seeing the Temple from Mount of Olives (Lk 19, 41). This is a reminder and a great lesson for all.

Jesus is the Temple

Temple is a place where God dwells or the place where man can experience the presence of God. The belief that the Almighty God who is invisible dwells in heaven is the background for this conviction. We have seen that God is heaven. God invisible is present in the midst of people through the tablets on which the Words, Ten Commandments that revealed His will were written. Those who live according to those Commandments would experience God's presence. The Tent and the Temple in which the Ark of the Covenant,

containing the Tablets of the commandments, was kept became a place where people experienced the presence of God in a special way.

However, by the incarnation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus, another form of presence of God became a reality on earth. Jesus is the Word of God become man and so He has become the real presence of God. This is far above and beyond any man made Temple. In the Gospel of John, this truth is made clear. In the Prologue John has emphatically stated: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1, 1-14).

The Bible calls the Ten Commandments "The Word of God". In the place of the Commandments written on tablets of stone, the Word of God became visible in a person. The humanity of Jesus stands in the place of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of meeting. The literal meaning of the words used in Greek is "Word became flesh and put up His Tent in our midst". The word used in Greek was "Eskenosen" which means put up a tent. Its noun form "Skene" which means tent. The body of Jesus has become the tent of the Word of God.

The glory of God appeared in the body of Jesus, the Temple. Hereafter, one should seek the presence

of God neither in Jerusalem Temple nor in any other man made temple but in Jesus who dwells in our midst. He is the real Temple.

It was in this sense that Jesus told the Jewish leadership about the Temple as a sign of His authority, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2, 19). It was a prophecy about His death and resurrection. But, they did not understand it. Not only that, they misused His words and accused him of saying that He would destroy the Temple and rebuild it.

During the conversation with the Samaritan woman who brought up the question of the place of worship, and the dispute between Jews and Samaritans in this regard, Jesus gave a definitive answer. The Jews worshipped in Jerusalem because they believed that Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son on that mountain, whereas the Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim because according to them it was there that Abraham had built the altar to sacrifice his son. That is why she wanted to know from Jesus where the true place of worship was. (Jn 4, 20).

In the answer Jesus gave her, there is a great revelation regarding the presence of God. Jesus told her: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him” (Jn 4, 21-23). What is this new worship? It referred to worshipping God the Father through Jesus the Truth, being filled with and

guided by the Holy Spirit who will be given through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Truth is the self-revelation of God. To the question of Thomas: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus replied: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14, 6). Hereafter one should search for the presence of God not in any Temple but in Jesus because He is the true "House of God". This truth was further clarified in the response of Jesus to Philip. "Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied". Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (Jn 14, 8-9).

Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, is the place where one experiences the presence of God. The statement of Paul confirms this statement, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colo 1, 19-20). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus entered into a different state. Until then Jesus had a body that could be seen and touched, but the resurrected body became invisible but present to all, beyond the limitations of space and time.

Jesus confirmed this truth when He said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18, 20). This promise was repeated at the end of the Earthly ministry, before sending out

the apostles with the universal mission: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28, 20).

John like Mathew does not report the Ascension of Our Lord but emphasizes His constant presence with us: “And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (Jn 14,3). This promise has been repeated several times in different forms. However, that presence should not be understood as a physical, palpable presence. That is why Jesus told Mary Magdalene, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20, 17). Jesus said that He would be with us always. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (Jn 14, 18). But, where do we find Him today? If Jesus is the true “House of God”, where is it? What is the relevance of the Churches we build today? These are the points that are being discussed next.

8

HOUSE OF GOD TODAY

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”. (Acts 2, 46-47).

This was the spirituality of the early Christian community. Most of them were Jews who accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. In their spirituality two things deserves special attention: first of all they continued to practice the Jewish rituals; secondly they joined in groups in the service of breaking the bread as Jesus had asked them to. Slowly they began to give less importance to the first and participated in the breaking of the bread with more interest and devotion. This was an important step in the history of the Temple and the Church after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

As long as the Jerusalem Temple stood, the Christians used to go there for prayers and conducted

pilgrimages. The best example of it is the pilgrimage of Paul (Acts 19, 21; 20,22; 21, 4.11.17). However, the Christians gave greater importance for gathering at home for prayer as they experienced the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst. The center of these meetings was the breaking of the bread, reliving the memory of the Last Supper. Slowly there came a change in the view of the Temple.

A New Approach to the Temple

In the Old Testament the presence of God was centered on a thing or space. They experienced the presence of God in the Tent of meeting where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Such objects became the sign of the presence of God. There were also places where they experienced the presence of God such as Bethel, Shechem, Horeb, Gilgal, and finally the Temple of Jerusalem.

But when the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, the presence of God shifted from place to person. Jesus was the real Temple and wherever Jesus went, there was the “House of God”. Slowly it became evident that to see God, one has to go not to a place but to the person of Jesus. Hence the question arises, where can we find Jesus?

Heavenly Temple

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3, 1-2).

Jesus who rose from the dead ascended into heaven on the 40th day (Acts 1, 9 -11), and sat at the right hand side of the Father. In other words, He was given back the glory He had set aside at the moment of incarnation (Acts 2, 33-36; Phil 2, 6-9). Mark and Luke describe the ascension of Jesus. In the letters of Paul also there are mentions about the ascension of Jesus. But it is the letter to the Hebrews and The Book of Revelation that provide the most vivid explanation of the ascension of Jesus Christ.

The main theme of the Letter to the Hebrews is the glorification of Jesus and His mediation in the heavenly Temple. Jesus is the High Priest, but his priesthood is different from the Levitical priesthood. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1,1-3). When the Letter starts presenting Jesus as the one who made purification from sins and is now seated on the heavenly throne it is evident that it gives great emphasis to the priesthood of Jesus. The statement: "Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up" (Heb 8, 1-2), leaves no room for doubt.

Instead of the Old Testament sacrifices that were not able to purify man from sin and provide salvation, Jesus entered heaven offering His own blood in sacrifice. The sacrifices in the Old Testament, the Tent and the Temple were all signs and symbols. Jesus, on the contrary, entered heaven, the real home to be with God the Father. “Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9, 24).

Heaven is the true “House of God”. That is where the glorified Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Father and mediates for us. Hence the “House of God” is not on earth but in heaven. The vision Stephen had during the trial before the Sanhedrin, supports this understanding: “But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven ... “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7, 55-56). Jesus was standing on the right side of God to speak for Stephen. One gets the same impression from the descriptions in the Book of Revelation chapters 4 to 20 which are filled with the descriptions of the heavenly throne. All the activities on earth are controlled from heaven.

“After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (Rev 4, 1). The first three chapters deal with the things John saw from the earth and the events happening on the earth. But, chapters 4-20 are centered on heaven as everything is guided from there. Heaven is

presented as the place where God's throne is, and as the dwelling place of the angels and the faithful who died as witnesses of Christ. God the Father is seated on the throne. In front of the throne there are seven torches of fire that represent the Holy Spirit. There is the Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, representing Jesus who died and rose again and received all the power and glory from the Father. There are twenty four elders who stand for the entire people of God, symbolically representing the twelve Tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Christ. Then there are countless people dressed in white representing the martyrs. The whole place was filled with the sound of singing praise to God (Rev 4-5; 7,8-17; 14, 1-5). All these descriptions, with the help of symbols and signs, present the real "House of God" which is heaven.

We can see some hints about heavenly house of God also in the letters of St. Paul (Rom 8, 34; 1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 12, 3; Eph 1, 20-22; Phil 2,5-11; Col 3,1). All these passages present the Risen Jesus sitting on the right hand side of God the Father. From there He will come again on the last day as the Judge. From these teachings it would seem that the real house of God is heaven. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that this is not the only picture the NT depicts about God's House and God's Presence. Besides, the questions what is heaven and where is it are also very important to ask.

Where is Heaven

According to the concept of the structure of the universe, taken for granted in the Bible, both OT

and NT, there is no difficulty to see where heaven is. According to the view prevalent among ancient people, adopted also in the Bible, the earth is a flat surface. The sky is like a huge umbrella opened up above the earth. Below the earth and above the sky, there is water. The earth is set on pillars in the water. Above the water over the sky is heaven. In this point of view, heaven is far above. The naked eye of the human beings cannot reach there as it is too far away and covered with clouds. The cloud that appeared during the ascension of Jesus, and covered him from the eyes of the apostles, could be understood from this point of view. The world of the dead is below the water under the earth. It has two levels. The bosom of Abraham is on the top level and where the just are resting. The lower part is hell and that is where the sinners condemned to hell are being tortured.

Against this background, it is easy to visualize Jesus visiting the netherworld and ascending into heaven. However, with the present day knowledge of the universe, all these might appear as wild imagination of the primitives. In the enormous universe with millions of galaxies, where is above and where is the below? Hence, the idea that heaven exists in someplace above does not make sense for the modern man. Then can we say that heaven and hell are mere fictions, products of human imagination? There are a lot of people who think that heaven and hell are mere fairy tales, invented to motivate people to do good and frighten them from doing evil. Here we have to pay special attention to the limitations of the language and also to the various literary form used in the descriptions.

First of all we have to understand that the concept of God, heaven, hell and Satan are beyond the comprehension of the human intellect. They are beyond time and space. The matters that are beyond time and space and are invisible to our senses are depicted through pictures and symbols. They are not to be taken literally. When we say heaven is above, it means that it is above everything, and beyond our comprehension. Because the rain comes from above the ancient people thought there was water reservoir above in the sky. Later the science taught that water evaporates and moves up and then it becomes cool and comes down as rain. However, the fact remains that rain comes from above.

We can see a similar explanation about heaven and heavenly throne. We cannot measure or limit God to our familiar three dimension understanding of space and time. Hence the very question, where is heaven, is irrelevant and invalid. Heaven is God and God is heaven; being in heaven means, being with God. The statement that the “house of God is in heaven” needs to be understood as metaphor. The Ascension of Jesus, His enthronement at the right hand of God and His return from heaven also should be understood from this perspective. The Gospels have given some hints about this.

Ascension – Presence

Of the four Gospels, Mathew and John do not describe the Ascension of Jesus. Even though Matthew does not report the ascension and enthronement, what he presents as the last words of

Jesus explain the meaning of these two events: "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28, 18-20). Receiving all authority from the Father and sitting at His right hand mean the same thing (Mt 28, 18). John also imparts a similar teaching. Even when Jesus said that He was going to the Father, He assured the disciples that He would not leave them orphans but will be with them always (Jn 14, 18-28).

Mark, who has described the Ascension, has clearly stated that Jesus will be with the Apostles. "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it" (Mk 16, 19-20). Luke who has portrayed the ascension in greater detail, tells several times in the Acts of the Apostles, that Jesus was in the midst of His disciples, leading and guiding them in their missionary journeys and activities. Jesus is present at the same time at the right hand side of the Father (Acts 2, 33; 7, 55), on the way (Acts 9, 5) and in the middle of missionary work (Acts 18, 9). Therefore, Ascension does not mean that Jesus has gone away into some distant planet in the sky, but that He has entered into the glory of the Father and is present everywhere. It is not a going away but

entering into a different type of relationship, being present in an invisible way.

This understanding about Ascension of Jesus also gives some important insights about the “House of God”. Mainly two symbols deserve special attention.

The Mystical Body of Christ, the Church

With the incarnation, the body of the Son of God became the real “House of God”. With the glorification that body took on a new dimension and meaning. The community of the faithful, the Church, is the mystical body of Christ. This is clearly stated in the epistles of St. Paul. “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom 12, 5).

The Church is the mystical body of Christ. The Apostle has spoken clearly, several times about the deep relationship the faithful have with Christ and with each other. The people become part of the mystical body of Christ, through Baptism and their faith in Christ (1 Cor 12, 12-13). “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12, 27). All the parts of the body come together to make the whole person. In the same way, though there are differences in the gifts and blessings individual members have received, all are directed by the same force to the same goal.

It was the Father who glorified Jesus through resurrection and Ascension and appointed Him as the head of the Church. “God put this power to work in

Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1, 20-23). Through His Cross, Jesus united all the faithful, that includes the Jews and Gentiles, in His body, and offered the same to the Father. It was for this, that Jesus came and sacrificed His life on the Cross (Eph 2, 14-16).

This was not an invention or inference of Paul, but a revelation he received from Jesus. The vision at the gate of Damascus had implied this mystery of the union of Jesus Christ with the faithful as the head has with the body. This intimate union was clear to him from the words of the glorified Lord who met him there: "Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9,3-5). The whole teaching of Paul, found in the 13 letters known in his name, is nothing but the unfolding of this initial revelation.

In the Letter to the Ephesians Paul tells clearly about the revelation he received: "...how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations

as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel..." (Eph 3,3-6). "The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power" (Eph 3, 6-7). Jesus is the head of this mystical body. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4, 15). It is the head that guides and keeps unity in the body. The same relationship exists between Jesus the head and the Church, His mystical body. A body without head is a dead body. The presence of Christ makes the Church alive and active. Seen from this point of view, the Church, the mystical body of Christ is the true "House of God".

The Church – House; Christ – Corner Stone

Jesus compared the Church, to a house, in the context of Peter's confession and the following promise: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Mt 16, 18). The Greek word, translates as Church is Ekklesia. This is the noun form of the verb ek-kalein which means to call out, or to choose. The Church is the community of the people who have been chosen and called together. It should be noted that Jesus further specifies "My Church". This community of the disciples of Jesus is like a house.

Jesus said that he would build His Church on the Rock that is Peter but He himself is the foundation or corner stone. Applying the Psalm, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Ps 118, 22), to himself Jesus had made it clear that he is the Corner Stone, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Mt 21, 42).

Paul has explained this idea more clearly in the letter to the Ephesians. “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Eph 2, 20-22). The House of God is the dwelling place of God. Now it is the community of the faithful. It applies not only to the Church in Ephesus but to the universal Church or the Church of Christ. Peter has also depicted Jesus as the Corner Stone (1 Peter 2, 6-9).

All these make it evident that Jesus Christ lives in the community that confesses Him as Lord and Savior. That community becomes the Church. This is true about the universal Church and local Churches as well as all the communities that gather in the name of Jesus. This has been confirmed by Jesus, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18, 20).

The Christian Faithful – The Houses of God

Jesus taught that God dwells not only in the communities of the faithful but also in each person who believes in Christ and so they are transformed as the Houses of God. The apostles in their evangelization

and catechesis have reminded the faithful about this truth and explained this promise of Jesus.

The night before He was handed over, during the farewell discourse, Jesus promised the Apostles that He will not leave them orphans but will send the Holy Spirit to help them. The Holy Spirit would teach them and lead them to the fullness of Truth; strengthen them and guide them. Not only the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Trinity would come and stay with the faithful if they live according to the teaching of Jesus. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn 14, 23). Jesus gave them a new Commandment that fulfills all the commandments: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13, 34). This is the only condition for a person to become the House of God. Until now, it was impossible to think that a human person could become the House of God. This promise contains deep and far reaching implications.

Paul mentions many times the theme of the faithful becoming the house of God. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor 6, 15). The apostle brings up this theme while responding to the various problems in the Church of Corinth. This was taken as the basic rule in marital relationship and the need for keeping sexual purity by emphasizing the importance to the body. Since God dwells in each person, the body becomes the house of God and the parts of the body become the parts of the body of Christ.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6, 19-20). The body of a Christian is a house of God; this is a very important point in the pilgrimage through the development of the concept of the House of God. God dwells not in the manmade buildings but in the hearts of the faithful. Paul has repeatedly tried to imprint this awareness in the hearts of the faithful.

“You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom 8,9-11). The House of God is where the Holy Spirit dwells, and where Jesus is present is the Temple of the Lord. This again points to the fact that the body of the faithful has become a “House of God”. This is an eternal dwelling place because even if the person dies, he will be resurrected to be with the Lord forever.

Paul reminds the faithful Colossae that a person becoming the Temple of the Lord is a “Mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we

proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colo 1, 26-28). The presence of God in the individuals would unite them all together, regardless of the status assigned to the person by the society. Through this, a person becomes a new creation. You “Have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (Col 3, 10-11).

Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth that this conviction would test the depth of each one’s faith. The Apostle prayed that none of the faithful may fail in the test. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? - unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor 13, 5).

It Was I

Now we turn our attention to a totally different type of the presence of God which is often neglected and therefore one may find it difficult to accept. A clear picture of this presence can be gained from the episode of the conversion of Saul into Paul. Saul was a religious fanatic but he was transformed into an ardent Apostle of Christ through this awareness of the presence of the Risen Lord in the followers of Christ.

Saul, was a young religious scholar from Tarsus, who firmly believed that Jesus who was condemned to death as a blasphemer by the highest Jewish

authority, the Sanhedrin, was a false Prophet. He considered Christianity as a dangerous development that threatened to create division in the Jewish religion and would ultimately wipe the very religion from the face of the earth. Hence, he decided to destroy the followers of Jesus Christ at any cost, before they became too strong.

But, everything turned upside down in a moment! He had procured letters of authorization from the officials in Jerusalem to arrest all the followers of Christ in Damascus. But as he approached the city with the soldiers, he was struck by a mighty lightning. He fell to the ground. Though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Then he heard a powerful but gentle voice, speaking to him: "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul did not know who was speaking and when he asked who it was, the voice responded, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9, 4-6). Those words changed his convictions and perceptions, his views and his very life. It is a mystery he meditated upon for the rest of his life and we can see how he gradually expounds it in his letters.

This episode contains a decisive revelation as far as the subject under discussion is concerned, namely the "House of God". Jesus was crucified before Paul had come on the scene. It is quite probable that he had never met Jesus in person. Paul was startled by the statement that "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting". He came to a rude awakening that Jesus of Nazareth whom the Jewish leadership condemned and the Romans crucified, has not disappeared from the world but He still lives. He is here at the entrance

to Damascus. This was the first revelation. Through death Jesus has transcended time and space. His claim that He is the Son of God is true. Just as God, He is present everywhere.

The next revelation went one step further and assured that overcoming death, Jesus still lives. Not only that He lives, He experiences the feelings of each one who believes in Him as his own, as if experiencing in his own body. When he was persecuting, arresting, imprisoning and stoning to death the Christians whom he considered to be heretics, in reality it was Jesus whom he was persecuting. This was something Saul could not bear as its impact was so great. Jesus is being victimized in each person who is persecuted for being a follower of Christ.

This was not a new discovery of Paul. Jesus had already revealed this truth while teaching about the Last Judgment. Jesus who entered into glory through his death and resurrection will come at the end of the world, not as Savior but as the Judge.

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you

welcomed me... Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,... 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25, 31-46).

Here we see the picture of Jesus who identifies Himself with the poor who are hungry, thirsty, sick and oppressed. This was the practical side of His command to love one another as He has loved us. Through the incarnation, death and glorification, God entered into a new relationship with humanity. Now in order to see God one has to look at the face of people, especially the poor and the needy. That is the center of the new religiosity and spirituality Jesus taught. This will be the criterion for the Last Judgment.

How do we put into practice this new insight about the "House of God" is a question all will have to answer. Should we not examine the approach of the religious believers, especially the Christians, toward the poor and the "House of God"? When crores of Rupees are collected from the people, as voluntary contributions and often by force, to put up Church buildings, we seem to neglect the poor who are the true "Houses of God", who are left to sleep on the way side and verandas of shops.

Great interest is taken to build and renew the church buildings. When we forget the true houses of God and build huge church building, let us not forget the words of Jesus. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Mt 25,45). The same insight is needed in the matter of using the money collected from the people as tithes and voluntary offerings. Jesus has warned that if we do not care for the poor, we will have to hear the terrible words of judgment: “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Mt 25,41).

God is the “House of God”

The history of humanity, that the Bible tells through symbols and stories, started in the Paradise where man was with God and walked with God. Because he went against the will of God, man was thrown out of Paradise; the doors of paradise were shut and sealed behind him. In the history that continued, God’s House is presented as up in the heaven whereas man toiled down on the earth. The Jerusalem Temple that symbolized the presence of God was not a place where God dwelt permanently; it was only a symbol. The distance between God and man was emphasized in the image of God living up in the heaven while man lived down here on the earth.

The incarnation of the Son of God filled the gap to a certain extent. The letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation present a detailed account of the house of God in heaven. Jesus, the High Priest was glorified through His death and resurrection. “But when Christ

had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb 10, 12). To redeem the fallen humanity Jesus offered Himself as the unique, acceptable sacrifice. The Book of Revelation presents Jesus in the symbol of the lamb, who was killed but stands alive, pointing to the sacrificial death and then the Resurrection and glorification. “To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev 3, 21).

The book of Revelation gives the impression that heaven is far away from the earth. The voice heard from the opened door in heaven, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this”, also gives the impression that heaven is above. In the descriptions in the book of Revelation till chapter 21, the distance between heaven and earth, the dwelling place of God and man continues.

However when the salvation history reaches its completion, the distance disappears. The earth and people are not going to heaven but heaven comes down. Here we reach the end of the pilgrimage through the chronicles of the “House of God”.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from

their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Jn 21, 1-4). What started with the Incarnation, "The Word became man and dwelt among us" (Jn 1, 14) will be fully accomplished with the establishment of the New Heaven and New Earth, where God makes His dwelling place among the people. Then what is the "House of God"? Is it heaven, earth or something else?

We can find an answer to this question in the description of the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem is presented as the city where God dwells. Its beauty is a challenge to the imagination of the human mind. Certain things in the description deserve special attention. "It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev.21,12-14).

All these show that what is called the New Jerusalem, heavenly city, and House of God refers to the people of God, including the Old Israel and the New Israel, the Church. At the center of the Book of Revelation, that is Chapter 12, a picture of the People of God is presented under the symbol of a woman, first as pregnant and crying out in pangs of child birth, and then after the birth of the child as a woman in the desert persecuted by the Dragon and protected

by God. In a similar way the Heavenly Jerusalem is described using symbols related to a building. Hence it is quite reasonable to conclude that the New Jerusalem is the symbolic presentation of the people of God, including both the Old and the New. Then, where is the “The Temple, House of God”?

The author of the book of Revelation gives a definitive answer to this question: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21, 22). In the profound sense, the “House of God” is not a place but it is God. The Almighty God, omnipotent and omnipresent God is the real Temple. Hence going to the house of God does not mean going to a particular place, but being with and in God. This is a reality beyond time and space. The ultimate goal of every human being, destined by God, is to be with Him forever.

The Almighty God and lamb is the “House of God”. It is not above but everywhere. When the history reaches its conclusion, only this Temple will remain, or the universe will be transformed into the House of God. It will not be stained by sin; there will be no tears, no death or separation, ultimately a state of everlasting joy. That is what is meant by being in the “House of God”.

This is not a picture that appears only in the book of Revelation. It could be seen in the Gospel of John as well. Many times and in particular in the farewell discourse, Jesus gave this teaching to the disciples. The disciples were in deep sorrow upon hearing that Jesus will be taken away from them through a brutal death. Then Jesus told them: “Do not let your hearts

be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (Jn 14, 1-3). However, it took a long time for the Apostles, including John to come to the realization that the House of the Father is not a place but it is the heart of the Father, the Father Himself

Being in the house of the Father means being in the Father; Jesus told them again: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves" (Jn 14, 11). Jesus promised the disciples the same kind of deep relationship that existed between Him and the Father: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14, 23). The prayer of Jesus confirms the truth that being in the Father and the Father staying in us mean the same thing. "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17, 21).

The heavenly life is said to be the "Beatific Vision". There is a basis for this in the first letter of John: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn 3, 2). But, we receive a still greater blessing through the teaching about the "House of God". Being in God and God being in us, and being deeply aware of this presence is the most

important aspect of human life. According to the Bible, God created human beings for this purpose.

This truth was revealed not only to John. Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica when they were weeping over the dead: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thes 4, 16-17). Eternal life is being with the Lord who is coming down from heaven. St. Paul repeated the same thing when he taught about death and resurrection (1 Cor 15). He spoke about this truth when he was speaking in at Areopagus: "...that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for `In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17, 27-28). When we open the eyes of faith, the whole universe would appear to be the "House of God". The New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven and becomes a dwelling place of man is a clear and complete picture of this eschatological vision.

This truth is clearly reflected in the promise Jesus gave to one of the men crucified with Him: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23, 43). Being with Jesus is the same as being in Paradise, God. Thus, the cycle of salvation history was completed. It starts in the Paradise and ends in the Paradise. This is the true picture of the "House of God". The building could be big or small but that is not the dwelling place of God. "House of God" is God.

CONCLUSION

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.... Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise “(Ps 84, 1-2.4).

There is an unending thirst in all human beings. This thirst is placed in the human hearts by God. People would try various ways to quench this thirst with material goods, accumulating wealth, the apparent security from having possessions, in various types of comforts and enjoyments, but none of it would satisfy the human heart, only increase the inner thirst. The human soul thirsts for God, nothing else will ever quench that thirst. Until one realizes this, the search would continue. A thirst that cannot be satisfied by anything in this world is placed in the human heart by its creator.

God created the humans to be with Him. Bible teaches this truth in various ways. The story of the Paradise or the Garden of Eden depicts a state of being with God. Man thirsts to go back to that Paradise, and that is the thirst he experiences. The

promise of the crucified Lord that “You will be with me in Paradise” is God’s response to this inner thirst.

In our search for the “House of God” we have seen various aspects of being with God and also the conditions for the same. The Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their sons experienced the presence of God who walked with them. God was present with them in Canaan, in the miseries of slavery, in Egypt, in prison, in the raging sea and in the desert. Without a particular dwelling place God walked with them.

With the Covenant at Mount Sinai, there came a sign for the presence of God, a sign that was misunderstood. They thought God was in the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, the Ark that contained it and the Tent of meeting where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Later, the Jerusalem Temple was considered as the dwelling place of God. At the same time they forgot that what was important was neither the Ark nor the Tent but the word of God written on the Tablets. All those items were signs that invited the people to live according to the Will of God, expressed through the Commandments.

The devotee desired to be in the “House of God”. That was the prayer of the pilgrim quoted in the beginning. To satisfy the thirst to be in the court of the Lord, one has to live according to the precepts of the Covenant. Nothing else, pilgrimage, offerings, sacrifices and other acts of devotions would be a valid substitute for a life according to the Commandments. The Prophets repeated this teaching many times

but the people did not understand it. Therefore, God destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, like the eagle that destroys its nest in order to teach the young ones to fly.

They still did not learn that they cannot experience the presence of God in the Temple without a life according to His Will, expressed through Commandments of the Covenant. They forgot the lesson they learned while they were in exile, that God is the Temple. They again concentrated on the physical building and rituals, without caring to live according to the precepts of the Covenant. Slowly the Temple became a market place and the den of the terrorists. That is when Jesus the Word Incarnate, came with a whip to cleanse the Temple. Jesus taught that the real Temple is His body, not any man-made building. Still they did not understand it. They condemned him to death saying that He wanted to destroy the Temple which they considered as sacred. They hoped in vain to please God by killing Him. The tragedy of trying to please God by killing His only Son!

With the coming of Jesus the meaning and goal of the Temple have changed. Hereafter, the “House of God” is not a place but the body of Jesus who is God Incarnate. God is dwelling in the mystical body of Christ. The universal Church, as well as the places where people gather in His name to pray, has become the “House of God”. Going one step further, each person who believes in Christ, becomes a dwelling place for the Holy Trinity.

This is where we have to start the search for the meaning of “House of God”. Here starts the pilgrimage to find God. Human heart is the “House of God” and

so we must try to find God dwelling in each individual person. For that we have to start with our own selves, acknowledge the presence of God in the depth of our being. Then we would become aware that each one of us is the “House of God” as God dwells in each person. It would inspire us to live according to His will.

There is a song written by Fr. Abel CMI., borrowing the idea from St. Augustine that beautifully depicts this inner thirst and search of the person: “I roamed around seeking the Lord... “Finally I turned to myself, I entered my heart that is where God dwells, and Love is His nature”. The Lord who resides in me transforms my body into a “House of God” and that is revealed through Love. We must understand “Love” in its full sense as Paul reminded the Church in Corinth (1 Cor 13) and as Jesus showed us through His teaching and action. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (Jn 13, 34). “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15,12-13). God is the greatest model of this kind of love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3, 16).

One who is aware that God dwells in him cannot remain selfish as he knows that the same God dwells in his neighbor also. Just as my body, body of the other also is a “House of God”. This awareness would lead one to a life of mutual respect and respect for each person, regardless of cast, creed sex and status. Each

individual's body is sacred because it is the Temple of God, a member of the mystical body of Christ. Hence we must honor and nurture human body according to the will of God.

Any act against this would be a sin that would invite the wrath of God and punishment. This is a great truth we discover in our search for finding the meaning and goal of the "then Temple, House of God". Trying to build a house for God, neglecting human body will not be acceptable to God because God dwells in the human beings not in the man-made buildings. This is the lesson we learn from the Bible and that is what Jesus has taught us.

Ultimately God is the "House of God". This universe is the dwelling place of God. There is no place from where God is absent. Our inner eyes should be opened to this presence. When we look with faith, we will be able to see God everywhere. Our pilgrimage should be not to a place somewhere out in the world, but to the inner core of our own being. We must be able to see God in people, especially those who are poor, oppressed, and exploited. As Mother Theresa, there are innumerable good people who serve the most neglected in the society.

This does not mean that there is no relevance for the Church buildings. A place is needed for the faithful to come together, to pray and to celebrate their faith; and also to experience the presence of God in the community. We need such houses of prayer. Since the active and sacramental presence of Jesus is in the Church building, it should be considered as House of God. What should be the structure of such

houses of God? How much money and man power should be used for it? What is the aim of this house of prayer?

Some years ago there was an advertisement: "Pride of the owner, jealousy of the neighbor". It is good to remember that many of the huge Basilicas and Cathedrals in the West, that now remain mostly as tourist attractions, were constructed with unjust mammon, exploiting the poor and extorting money in various unjust ways. In fact one of the reasons of Luther's protest was the misuse of Indulgences for the construction of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. Today many Church buildings seem to be going in this direction and it should lead all to a deep examination of conscience. The Prophet Malachi shouted in the name of God: "Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire upon my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand" (Mal 1,10). But then he continued to teach them what they should do to make themselves and their offerings acceptable to the Lord: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Mal 3, 10).

This is a suggestion valid also for today. Usually many, institutions as well as individual leaders, are very interested in collecting the tithes from the faithful, but what do they do with it? How much of it goes to the poor? Is the purpose of the tithes set

by God being fulfilled? In order that the buildings constructed in the name of God may become real houses of God, they should be not only places of prayer, but also places that give protection to the poor. That was what Prophet Malachi was saying.

Some tribal people have a practice. Their house of prayer, called God's House (devapura) is at the center of the colony. It is never locked; in fact they do not lock their huts either. All the food materials they collect will be kept in this God's House; each family can take what they need from it. As long as there is food in God's House, no one in the colony would have to starve.

What a beautiful attitude, what a human practice, what an inspiring tradition!! Renouncing the desire for accumulating wealth and showing off in luxury, we should turn to the true houses of God, the people. It would be good to keep in mind the instruction Jesus gave about how to pray: "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6,6).